# THE MONSTER IN THE POOL

ARMSTRONG LIVINGSTON

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*By*

ARMSTRONG LIVINGSTON

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*To*

My Aunt
FRANCES LIVINGSTON GLOVER
With All Affection

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# THE MONSTER IN THE POOL

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## CHAPTER I

### THE HOUSE OF BARRON

Two middle-aged gentlemen, walking in opposite directions, met on a shady village street. As they drew near, each looked straight before him with blank, unseeing eyes, and when they had passed, each pursued his way with a slightly raised chin and a faint air of disdain. Beyond these nearly imperceptible manifestations, neither elected to reveal his apprehension of the fact that the other still sullied the pure surface of the earth by his presence.

In all rural communities neighborhood quarrels are common and generally commonplace; after a brief period of bitterness they usually die away of sheer attrition, leaving their protagonists a trifle worn, perhaps, but smooth again. The quarrel between these two men, however, presented certain features that distinguished it from the run of ephemeral feuds: in the first place they were brothers, and in the second, they had not exchanged a word for nearly thirty years.

Indeed, it was only on very rare occasions that their paths chanced to cross, as they had done to-day, and that they laid eyes upon each other. Philip Barron, for the sake of exercise, walked from his home to the

village every afternoon, called at the post-office for the second mail of the day, chatted a minute or two with old Silas Gorse, the present postmaster, then strolled home again. His brother, Sidney Barron, on the other hand, rarely left his house, which was about a half-mile farther from the village than Philip's, but chose to lead an almost cloistered life in the seclusion of his fast-decaying domicile. On this particular occasion he had only gone to the village because a busy dentist had refused to go to him, and he had consented to the expenditure of a sum of money for the dental operation simply because the time had come when it seemed as if he must lose a tooth or else the top of his head. There is a limit to the physical suffering that even a miser can endure.

Philip Barron, the one of the pair who was proceeding toward the center of the village, found his thoughts almost unconsciously turning backward a score of years and ten as a result of the chance encounter with his brother. He smiled rather grimly as he ran over in his mind the more salient features of the row that had split the family after his father's death, and for the hundredth time he assured himself that it was he who had been in the right and that he would act no differently if it were all to be gone through again on the morrow.

Old Penobscot Barron had had six children in all—a fact which gave the village wit a welcome opportunity to remark that the family was Barron by name but not by nature—two of whom had died in infancy. The remaining four, three sons and a daughter, had survived their father. As might almost be guessed, it was the old gentleman's will and what grew out of it that

precipitated the quarrel which had thenceforth endured.

Philip, as the eldest, received the Barron homestead *with all its contents*—his grim smile came again as his thoughts lingered a moment on that delicious phrase—which was not an unreasonable bequest considering that he had recently married and would presumably soon have need of commodious quarters.

Sidney, the second in years, received a smaller house that Penobscot had acquired by the mortgage-foreclosure route, together with all that it contained. Philip grinned again.

Lydia, the sister, and Cornelius, the youngest of the four children, received no property, but together with Philip and Sidney they had divided a very considerable sum that the old gentleman had left in stocks and bonds and banks, so their lot could not be regarded as altogether unhappy. Lydia invested some of her share in a small property close by the village, but thereafter some unlucky speculations and a fire which destroyed her home combined to cripple her financially, while the worry attendant upon her troubles succeeded in doing as much to her physically. Fortunately for herself, she had not been so openly vindictive against Philip as her two brothers, and consequently did not have to eat such a very large portion of humble pie when he came to her rescue by offering her a home beneath his roof. Now, mused Philip, she was penniless and a permanent invalid, confined to a wheel-chair and dependent on his charity.

Cornelius, who had been the wildest and most spendthrift of them all, had taken his share and gone west after the quarrel. Five years later he had written to

Sidney for money and had been curtly refused by that careful gentleman; apparently he had been too haughty or angry to make the same appeal to Philip, and since then, nearly twenty-five years, no further word of him had been received. He might be dead, for all they knew or cared.

And the quarrel itself? Philip Barron did not grin, but frowned instead, as he thought of that. Those jewels! Where were they? What in the mischief had his father *done* with them?

The unanswered query brought him to the post-office, and as he absent-mindedly swung back the screen door which kept out the autumn flies, his thoughts were abruptly recalled to the present by his sudden collision with some one who was just coming out.

"I beg your pardon!" said a pleasant voice.

"My fault entirely," admitted Philip Barron promptly. "I was certainly day-dreaming." He looked up as he spoke, and somewhat to his surprise found himself regarding a young man who cut a rather curious figure in that small village. He was a stranger, and although he might have been merely a drummer come to display his wares to the local merchants, there was something in his cool air of assurance, in the perfect fit of his immaculate clothes, that argued against so trite an explanation. Undoubtedly there existed in the outer world super-drummers who carried themselves like that and spoke in the same agreeable, well-modulated accent, but they never came to Tarryville! "I trust I didn't hurt you," continued Barron, more for the sake of prolonging the conversation while he proceeded to study this specimen of a higher civilization than from any fear that he might have inflicted a serious injury.

"No harm done at all," answered the young man.

Philip Barron was aware of two dark-gray eyes that swept him suddenly from head to foot, and if they passed over his person in a flash, they were still so bright and sharp that he felt convinced they had missed no single detail of his person. The next moment the stranger had lifted his panama hat, inclined his head politely and departed. Barron watched him for an instant as he swung up the street with long easy strides and disappeared into the Tarryville Arms; then he essayed again and more successfully to enter the post-office.

The bulk of the mail had been distributed and the dingy room was empty save for himself. A white-whiskered individual peered out from behind the wicket at the sound of his step.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Barron, good afternoon."

"'Afternoon, Silas; how's the rheumatism?"

"Doing nicely, Mr. Barron,—much too nicely for me!" The old man cackled at his favorite pleasantry. He reached into one of the mail-boxes, satisfied himself that the two letters it contained were only advertisements and handed them through the window. "Say, Mr. Barron, did you notice a nice-looking young feller who went out just before you came in?"

"Just *as* I came in; we bumped," corrected Philip. "Who is he?"

"His name is Traynor—James Traynor—and he comes from New York. He's stopping at the Arms."

"Naturally; a man stops there or he stops in the street! Go on, Silas; what is his business and why has he come to Tarryville? I don't doubt you've had him inside-out long before this."

"He's been working on a big case, and he's come up here because he wants a rest and somebody told him the fishing in our river was pretty hard to beat. He's only going to stay a few days."

"Working on a case? Lawyer or doctor?"

"No, sir, he's not a lawyer nor a doctor either; he's a private detecktiff, and one of the best in the city. If you ever want anything done in that line you couldn't do better than go to him."

"Thanks. I don't expect to need a private detective."

"Knock wood!" suggested the other cautiously.

"I shall do nothing so ridiculous," retorted Philip Barron good-humoredly, and thrust his hands into the side pockets of his coat. "Did he tell you himself how good he was?"

"No, sir, he hasn't said a word about himself. It was Jerry Mason, the new clerk at the Arms, that told me he was here for rest and fishing, and it was Sheriff Bascom who told Jed Potter, who told me, that Traynor is one of the slickest detecktiffs in New York, and I reckon that means the world. He's made a pile of money at his trade, too."

Any one at all conversant with small-town gossip will readily understand that these intimate little histories of the newcomer must be taken with a grain of salt. Philip Barron, cynical and sophisticated, accepted this description of the stranger with two grains of salt, one for Jed Potter and one for old Silas. He assumed —rightly, as it chanced—that the sheriff had casually remarked that there was a well-known New York detective named James Traynor, and the rest of the embroidery had been quite innocently supplied by the

garrulous Potter and the postmaster. With such a good start and in such competent hands, it would be curious if young Mr. Traynor were not presently promoted to the chieftancy of a celebrated international secret service bureau!

"He doesn't look like a detective," he demurred. He took the two letters he had received, glanced at them, tore them up and threw the fragments in the general direction of the waste-basket. "Anyway, I repeat that I don't expect to need a private detective—and I refuse to knock wood! Good day, Silas."

" 'By, Mr. Barron. See you to-morrow."

Philip left the post-office and turned his steps homeward. The little distraction of the good-looking young man and the chat with old Gorse had served to divert his thoughts from his brother and the ancient quarrel. He walked slowly, able to enjoy and keenly appreciative of the golden beauty of the late September afternoon. In five minutes he had left the village behind him, and although the road now ran slightly uphill, it was still edged with magnificent elms which shaded and kept it cool. He was young for his age—fifty-five—and this daily constitutional kept him in excellent trim. He had not turned a hair, his pulse beat no faster and his breath came no harder when he finally crested the low hill he was on.

The Barron property consisted of the rambling old house and about twenty acres of indifferent soil. In Penobscot's day this had been farmed with some measure of success, but shortly after his death, when poor prices and a shortage of labor cut the margin of profit to infinitesimal proportions, Philip had decided that the labor was not worth the pain. He had plenty

of money, more than he was ever likely to need or spend, and he did not see any reason why he should struggle with recalcitrant soil and resistant farm-hands. He sold his agricultural impedimenta for what they would bring and abandoned his farm to nature. As a result, he had twenty acres of sizable second-growth that would some day be valuable timber and in the meantime made a very pretty park laced and interlaced with shady fragrant paths.

The house itself was a delightful two-story affair dating back almost to Colonial days, and Philip, like his father before him, took pride in keeping it in perfect order. It was set in a clearing. Fifty yards back from the noise and dust of the auto-ridden highway, it was a haven of peace and quiet. Fifty yards behind it, fringed with weeping willows, rippled the joyous trout-stream that old Gorse had dignified with the name of "river." A tranquil, restful estate where a man of moderate fortune and even more moderate wants might truly live the life of a country gentleman.

The only ridiculous thing about it, in truth, was the name of the property, which was neatly fixed in marble letters on one of the vine-covered stone posts at the entrance of the private drive. It chanced that the stream, taking advantage of a deep natural depression, broadened into a pool directly behind the house—a pool some ten yards in breadth and thirty in length. Old Penobscot, who liked his little joke, insisted upon referring to this basin as the "lake" and had carried his humor to the point of calling the estate "Lakeside." The absurd name irritated Philip every time he read it when passing between the gate-posts, but a sense of filial respect had always kept him from changing it to something more appropriate.

From the top of the hill which he had just ascended one could look down upon the whole of the property, for Lakeside lay in a little valley between two hills. A convenient boulder by the roadside offered a comfortable seat from which to view the attractive panorama, and it was Philip's daily custom to rest there a minute or two on his way home while he quietly enjoyed the prospect. There was the road, twisting white across the valley and up the farther hillside, there was the house, painted a deep green and with a wisp of smoke always curling from its gray stone chimneys, there was the softer green of the young trees which covered the greater part of the property—and there was the still blue surface of the pool. Philip Barron never tired of that view.

To-day, however, he was apparently fated to encounter strangers. When he reached the top of the hill, he noticed instantly a small car that was parked in the grass by the side of the road. A stocky gentleman in reddish tweeds—the owner of the automobile, presumably—was seated on the flat boulder, an easel and canvas before him, painting industriously. He was so occupied with his work that he did not hear Philip approach, and he started quite visibly when the older man wished him good afternoon.

"Oh—hullo!" he returned. As if the interruption gave him an excuse for taking a respite from his labors, he put down his brush and palette, drew a reeking pipe from his pocket, and began to fill it from a worn leather pouch. "Nice day, isn't it? Got a match?"

Philip had a match. He produced a box, and while the artist finished charging and lighting his pipe he stepped closer and inspected the canvas.

"You like my house enough to paint it?" he asked.

"Your house?" The painter squinted one eye through a cloud of tobacco smoke. "Indeed!"

"Yes, it is my house." Philip Barron hesitated, then added with pardonable pride, "Mine and my father's before me, and before him, a few more generations. It is an old house for this country. What do you think of it?"

"What do I think of it?" The man in the reddish tweeds took his pipe from his mouth and regarded the speaker straightly. "Before I answer, perhaps I should warn you that I have a habit of speaking the truth."

"Very commendable. With an occasional deviation for the sake of amusement or excitement, it is the course I follow myself." Barron smiled encouragingly. "If the truth in this case is unpleasant, I expect I can stand the shock! What *do* you think of it?"

"Well, then—I find it sinister."

"Sinister!"

"Uh-huh. That was the quality which first caught my eye and lured me on to paint it. You don't see it, of course—you're used to it." The artist waved his pipe at the subject of their conversation. "I should say—and, mind you, I know nothing about it whatsoever—I should say that it is a house which has had some grim chapters in its history."

"Few old houses escape that," answered Philip Barron.

"Do you care to tell me if I'm right?"

"Frankly, I don't see why I should!"

"Very well. Now I will go on answering your question; I not only think that house has had a history,

but I think it has a future. Not a pleasant future. I sense an aura of evil about it. Something tragic is impending. You don't feel it yourself?"

"I certainly don't!" Philip's astonishment sounded in his voice. Surely this was a quaint encounter with a quaint character! A nervous sensation shook him briefly as it occurred to him that he might be conversing with an out-and-out lunatic, but a careful scrutiny of the artist's appearance dissipated the idea. His eye was calm and clear, his face was not beautiful but it was open and honest, his complexion was good, his hand was steady. His hair and dress were neat, his tobacco, judged by its aroma, was excellent. No, he was not a lunatic. Philip probed gently for an explanation of his singularity. "Do you mind telling me just why you feel that way about the future of my house?"

"I'd tell you like a shot, if I could. It is nothing I can put into words. As I said, I just *sense* catastrophe. It's a presentiment."

"I see. A presentiment! May I ask Mr.—er——?"

"Johnson. Perry Johnson."

"May I ask, Mr. Johnson, if you are frequently afflicted with these presentiments?"

"I've had a few—yes." The painter knocked the dottle from his pipe, picked up his brush and glanced from his canvas to its subject and back again. "I hope I haven't disquieted you by airing this one?"

"Not in the least." Philip smiled again, then changed the subject easily. "Are you staying in Tarryville?"

"No. I'm spending a few days at Weyburn. This is pretty country to paint." He nodded toward his small car. "I rattle around in that looking for inter-

esting bits. That is how I happened to notice your place this afternoon."

"You will hardly finish your canvas to-day?"

"Oh, dear, no! I shall only work on it between four and six, when the light is right, and I'll be here several afternoons to come."

"In that case we shall meet again. I'm curious to see what the finished picture will be like." Philip Barron made to move on, then halted again, a twinkle in his eye. "As for these presentiments——"

"Yes?"

"Well—I've just had one myself."

"Oh! What is it?"

"I've a presentiment," said Philip, shaking his head gently, "that your liver is out of whack!"

## CHAPTER II

### GEOFFREY AND DENISE

The look of haughty contempt with which Mr. Perry Johnson greeted the unwarranted reflection cast upon his intimate interior brought a smile to Philip Barron's lips. It lingered there as he turned away and descended the road to his house, and faint traces of it still remained as he passed through the front gates and approached the rambling, green-painted structure which the artist had found "sinister."

The short driveway was neatly graveled, and as he did not like the crunching of the fine stone beneath his feet, Philip walked along the strip of green turf that edged it. Consequently his step was soundless, and as he drew near the vine-covered summer-house that was situated on the lawn a few yards from the road, he was able to hear quite distinctly two voices, a man's and a woman's, although they were pitched in a subdued key. He not only could hear them, but he could recognize them. Then the smile faded from his face, his brow knitted slightly and a click-click of impatience escaped his pursed lips.

One of the speakers was Geoffrey Barron, a young man of twenty-three who had a good position with a stock-brokerage office in New York and only came to Lakeside for his week-ends. He was Philip Barron's adopted son; after five years of married life, Philip

and his wife had decided to adopt a child, since they seemed unlikely to have one of their own, and they had legally acquired a nameless morsel of humanity that had been left on the steps of a foundling asylum. Philip gave the child his own surname, and the Geoffrey came from Mrs. Barron's father.

Two years later the doors of their houses were opened to still another child, this time a girl, the daughter of Mrs. Barron's sister and only relative. The circumstance leading up to her advent had been sufficiently tragic in all conscience; the little three-year-old girl had been sitting alone in the tonneau of a big automobile when the car was struck and smashed to splinters by a locomotive at a grade crossing. Donald and Marjorie Keith, side by side in the front seat, had been instantly killed, but the tiny Jocelyn had been flung from the car and dropped on a soft marshy bit of ground beside the right-of-way with not a scratch or a bruise to mar the miracle. Alone in the world, she had promptly been taken by her aunt and uncle, and Philip Barron had been appointed guardian for her and for the money left her by the unfortunate parents.

Thus it came about that Jocelyn Keith and Geoffrey Barron, a year older than she, grew up together at their respective boarding-schools. They were an attractive pair of youngsters from the very beginning, and Mrs. Barron made no secret from her husband of the fact that she hoped the boy- and girlhood friendship would ripen into love. Sadly enough, the good lady was not destined to live sufficiently long to see her wishes either realized or dashed. Eight years before, when Geoffrey was fifteen and Jocelyn four-

teen, and when they were still too young for even a hint of her plans for their future, she had died suddenly, a victim to one of the waves of influenza that swept the country.

Philip Barron shared her hopes that the two would become fond enough of each other to marry, but as the years passed he began to fear that his desire was doomed to disappointment. The two were greatly attached to each other but only, as far as he could see, in a brother-and-sisterly way. Geoffrey finished college and went to work; Jocelyn also went to college, and liked it so well and found the life there so congenial that she returned for a post-graduate course. Philip made no objection to that, for he held to the sensible belief that even a young and attractive woman is the better for some occupation. Now she was home again, her thirst for academic knowledge temporarily sated, and he had once more begun to hope that Geoffrey and she would commence to take a more romantic interest in each other. Philip was too wise to attempt to force the issue, and to do him justice he had no desire that the two should marry merely to please him. That might end in unhappiness for all of them. So he simply saw to it that they were thrown together as much as possible, then leaned back on his oars and left the rest to nature and propinquity.

Now he frowned as the sound of the voices came to him from the summer-house, for the soft tones that responded to Geoffrey's deeper note were not the cool clear accents of Jocelyn Keith. They were more musical, a trifle slurred, and there was about them the faintest trace of a foreign intonation. In brief, it was Denise Morand with whom Geoffrey was talking.

Philip would have liked very much to learn the subject of their conversation, and he was quick to see that he had every opportunity to do so. The vine that covered the summer-house was thick, the grass beneath his feet effectually muffled his step, and no doubt the two who talked together were too interested in their own affairs to detect readily an alien presence. Mr. Barron, shrewdly assailed by temptation, yielded so far as to take three long strides in the direction of the summer-house — and then, conscience-stricken, abandoned his unworthy design and coughed like a gentleman.

The next moment he stood in the entrance of the retreat.

Geoffrey Barron, a tall, good-looking fellow with crisp, curly brown hair, brown eyes and sun-tanned cheeks, rose instantly to his feet and held out his hand with a smile.

"Good afternoon, father."

"Hello, Geoffrey—have a good trip up from the city?"

"Fair to middling. It was awfully hot in the train, and in the city, too. I'll be glad of a day or two of our fresh air."

Philip turned his searching eyes to the other occupant of the summer-house: a tall, black-haired, very attractive young woman of twenty-three or -four. For an instant, as Barron appeared in the doorway, she had remained seated, her head bent over some sewing, then, with the effect of suddenly bethinking herself, she came quickly to her feet and stood waiting. Her cheeks were a warm dusky red, but that was her usual coloring and Philip could not translate it into any suggestion of em-

barrassment. He nodded to her and waved to the armchair she had vacated.

"Please sit down, Miss Morand," he urged courteously. "I happened to hear your voice as I was passing and stopped to ask you how my sister is this afternoon. You have left her alone?"

"I have good news for you," answered the girl, and her own eyes expressed some of the pleasure she expected him to feel. "Miss Barron spoke two or three sentences this afternoon—quite lucidly. She recognized me and called me by name. Then she told me she wished to take a nap and preferred to be alone, so I brought my sewing out here."

"That is splendid!" said Philip heartily, and his interest in his sister's condition distracted his thoughts from their earlier trend. "We must get hold of Doctor Cosgrove and let him know!"

"I telephoned him at once," said Miss Morand. "He was very much encouraged. He thinks her mind may be fully restored eventually."

"He has held steadily to that belief." Something of the cheerfulness went out of Barron's face, and his voice became flat and hesitant. He glanced from his adopted son to Denise Morand, then added doubtfully. "After all—I don't know. Perhaps it is almost an unkindness to wish her a return to her full senses."

"The dickens!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "Why?"

Denise, quicker of apprehension and imagination, nodded her head gravely.

"You mean—because of her helpless condition?"

"Exactly. Lydia was always an active woman until this shock paralyzed her physically and mentally. As she is now, we may suppose that she is mercifully un-

aware of her condition; on the other hand, if she regains her full senses and finds herself chained for life to a wheel-chair, powerless to do anything for herself, dependent always on others for every service——" He broke off abruptly, and his eyes were troubled.

"Perhaps you are unduly pessimistic," urged the girl. "If her mind can recover, why not her body? Perhaps not entirely, but at least to a point where she will have some control of her limbs. They are doing wonderful things now with electricity."

"Yes, that is true," agreed Philip Barron more hopefully. He took his watch from his pocket and glanced at it. "I have some letters to write; on my way to the study I will look in and see if she is still asleep, or if she is awake and needs anything." His thoughts jumped back to their former current. "Er—Geoffrey, why don't you rout out the car and take Jocelyn for a run before dinner? She has been pale, lately."

"Unfortunately, I understand she has routed out the car herself and gone to a bridge-tea in Weyburn."

"Oh," said Mr. Barron blankly. "Of course, in that case—well, I must be going along. See you later, my boy." With a kindly nod which included the girl, he strolled away toward the house.

A little silence in the summer-house followed his departure. Denise Morand bent her head and contemplated her sewing with an air of firmly excluding everything else from her consideration; Geoffrey, for his part, leaned forward in his chair and regarded her in much the same manner. It was he who broke the silence at length, speaking at once lightly and seriously.

"Let's see," he said. "What were we talking about when my father came by?"

"*You* were speaking of something that I hope you will not speak of again," answered Denise promptly. She looked up to meet his eye and her color deepened. "Please, Mr. Barron——"

"Geoffrey!"

"This once, then! Please, Geoffrey, don't make things hard for me! I have been happy, here. I don't want to leave. But I can't marry you; I can *never* marry you! If you won't accept that decision as final, and if you persist in arguing the point—then I *must* leave. I came into your life from—from nowhere, and I will go out of it again just as completely. I don't want you to think anything too bad of me—I have done nothing I'm ashamed of—but there are circumstances that prevent my—my ever being more than a friend to you. I've told you that before."

"You have—several times," agreed the young man calmly. "You have also told me that you are not already married. If you had a husband somewhere in the world I'd admit that a serious impediment existed——"

"Oh—if only I'd thought of it!" cried the girl ruefully.

"As it is, I'm not impressed. Another impediment might have lain in the fact that you didn't care for me, but unfortunately for your case, in a weak moment—last Saturday evening, the seventeenth of September, at eight-forty-five, to be exact—you admitted that you are not altogether indifferent to me——"

"What a ghastly memory!" She smiled a bit wistfully. "Anyway, that was six days ago and I've had time since to recover from my—my temporary infatuation!"

"That, of course, is absurd," declared young Mr. Barron serenely. "Day by day and in every way you must be getting fonder of me. It's quite inevitable."

"Oh! The conceit of it!"

"As for the mystery which you insist shadows your past and casts a blight on my future, I suggest that you take it and place it in a secure casket and bury it about six feet deep—and forget it! I promise never to exhume it—never to embarrass you with unwelcome questions!" He was still speaking lightly, but his eyes were very serious as they rested on her flushed cheeks. "This is a queer family, Denise, and if you marry into it, bringing a mystery with you as your dower—well, you won't be out of place! One good mystery to a generation is a low average for the Barron family!"

"Gracious, that sounds rather exciting! Won't you tell me about some of them? I love mysteries!"

"So I've noticed," commented Geoffrey sorrowfully. He was quick enough to see that she was trying to change the subject, and shrewd enough to yield to her intention. He had pressed her enough, he thought, for one day; she was not the type of young woman to be rushed off her feet and carried away *à la* Lochinvar. "Mysteries? Well, I suppose the Barron jewel mystery is about the fattest of the lot! You've heard of it?"

"Ah—the Barron jewels!" She was instantly alert and interested, he noted rather gloomily, and demanded of himself with the cynicism of youth, what woman would not rather hear about jewels than love? "The Barron jewels! I heard your father mention them one day and I gathered there was something

mysterious about them. Do tell me, or"—she glanced at her wrist-watch—"or is it too long a story?"

"No, it's not long. As for the mystery, I can give you that in a nutshell—it is simply, where are they?"

"They're lost? Stolen, perhaps?"

"Not as far as any one knows—just lost. My father's father was Penobscot Barron, and *his* father was William Barron, the third of the family in this country. They have a history, the Barrons, and with all their faults I've often wished that I was really of their blood instead of—of a nameless waif."

"That sounds bitter, Geoffrey. You're really very nice as just *you,* and I assure you you're well quit of the Barron blood."

"Why so emphatic?" asked the young man, his face brighter for the compliment and her use of his Christian name. "What have you got against the tribe of Barron?"

"Oh—I haven't lived here six months without hearing a few things!"

"Well, this branch seems doomed to extinction, anyway. My father has no children—sounds weird, that! —and neither has Lydia nor Sidney."

"Wasn't there another brother who went away?"

"Uh-huh; that was Cornelius. But he seems to have dropped off the map completely." Geoffrey grinned. "He seems to have been a good sport with a bit of the devil in him, and I wish I could have known him. I believe Cornelius and I would have hit it off pretty well. What? Did you speak?"

"No—I swore!" explained Denise Morand, holding up a finger-tip from which a tiny drop of blood was oozing from a needle-prick. With some difficulty she

repulsed the anxious ministrations he immediately offered. "Don't be silly—it's nothing. And please go back to the jewel mystery."

"Oh. Well, the last person actually known to have them was William Barron. After his wife's death, he swore no other woman should wear them while he lived, and he stowed them away in some secure hiding-place. One day, ten years later, he was all alone in the house and—I am afraid the story gets a bit gruesome here."

"Yes?"

"Three masked men, who must have watched for their chance, broke in and attacked the old man, who was getting feeble by then. They—I have to tell you—they resorted to torture to make him tell where the jewels were hidden. But William Barron was only feeble physically; his heart and spirit were as stout as ever. His sufferings were brought to an end by the chance arrival of some visitors at the front door, and the three ruffians were forced to flee by the rear. First, though, they struck poor old William a blow on the head and left him for dead.

"He wasn't dead—not quite. The visitors heard something of the commotion and had the courage and sense to break in. They found William conscious but at the point of death. He managed to stammer a few words, which some one of them noted down, and they show that the old boy was aggressive and full of pep to the last breath.

" 'They didn't get them!' he said. 'They didn't get them! They couldn't make me speak! They're still in the place I hid them! They're in——'

"Then his head fell back and he died."

"That's not a very pleasant story," said the girl gravely and sympathetically. "What courage he must have had!" She looked thoughtfully at Geoffrey. "So he died just before he revealed the hiding-place?"

"Yes. In his will he left the jewels to Penobscot, his only son, but there was no indication of their whereabouts. Penobscot stood up after the reading of the will and swore that he would have nothing to do with them even if he ever found them. There was blood—his father's blood—on them, and he would have none of them.

"As far as money went, he could well afford to adopt that attitude. He was quite rich."

"Do you suppose he ever found them?"

"It is thought so. In his old age, Penobscot liked a glass or so too much—that's probably where his youngest son, Cornelius, got his bit of deviltry!—and he once made a remark to some curious friends who questioned him while he was half-seas-over that led them to think he knew where the jewels were. Unfortunately, he took it all back the next day, when he was sober, and after that slip he was more cautious and silent than ever. Then it came his time to die, and a strange coincidence asserted itself. It was a stroke, and he had only time to whisper a few words to his children, who were with him. They caught the word 'jewels,' and they think his lips framed the words, 'my study,' and then, like his father before him, he died while trying to explain further."

"I see," said Denise, and her eyes revealed her interest in the story. "That really *is* a mystery! But what happened after that? Did his children decide to leave them alone, too?"

"They did not!" exclaimed Geoffrey, and laughed a little grimly. "Their first impulse was to start hunting at once, but more decent feelings prevailed and they agreed to postpone any search until after old Penobscot was buried.

"That night, however, Lydia and Sidney came face to face outside the study, whither each was bound, with the pious idea of doing the others in the eye——"

"Oh! You don't mean they were going to *steal* the——"

"This narrator knoweth not! He only knoweth what he hath been toldeth!"

"Go on."

"Before Lydia and Sidney had finished saying what they thought of each other, the noise aroused Cornelius and Philip, who came from their rooms and proceeded to say what they thought of the first two. The trouble really began then and there. They scowled at one another during the funeral, and they scowled at one another during the reading of the will—in which no mention was made of the jewels!

"Before their father was cold in his grave, they had fallen upon the study tooth and nail and pretty well ripped it to pieces without finding anything. They were jealous and mutually distrustful, and that drove them on to forget the common decencies. It was my father who first recovered his senses, and he has told me often how ashamed he has since been of that lust for treasure-trove to which he momentarily succumbed.

"The other three were all for taking the house to pieces, brick by brick and board by board, but my father put a definite quietus on that. They contended

that, since the jewels had not been specifically mentioned, they should, when found, be divided equally among the four children. My father retorted that the jewels were yet to be discovered, that if they were anywhere in the house they were his by virtue of the clause which left him the house and *all its contents,* and he added that not another stick of the old place should be disturbed! The law bore him out, if equity didn't."

"I don't think he was—altogether just," said Denise musingly. "It isn't always right to stick to the letter of the law."

"Well, that was his decision, and I don't think he has ever repented of it. They all had money enough to be comfortable, and their row over the jewels was pretty much a declaration of greed. Anyway, it ended in a four-cornered scrap. Cornelius went west, after blowing most of his patrimony. The others stayed here on terms of frank hostility. The only change in their attitude came when Lydia went broke and was taken ill; then my father took her in, and in caring for her the way he has I think he is trying to make amends for that thirty-year-old quarrel."

"Do you suppose he has ever found the jewels?"

"I'd take my oath he hasn't. I'll even go further, from what I know of him, and say that I don't believe he has even looked for them. He appreciates old Penobscot's feeling that there is blood on them, and although he is the least superstitious of men, I do think he's afraid that if he turns them up, more blood will flow."

"Gracious!" Denise shivered. "Your mystery story is quite interesting, but fearfully gory! What do

you think yourself? Have you ever tried to puzzle out where they may be?"

"Thanks! That's a job for a regular hawkshaw, not a simple stock-broker like me!"

"But there must be some obvious places——" She broke off with a little laugh. "However, you'll think I'm encouraging you to search, and I dare say your father is right in thinking them best left alone!"

"I don't think I'd need much encouragement in the present state of my finances!" answered Geoffrey half jestingly. "If I had the ghost of an idea where they might be, I'm afraid I would emulate my legal aunt and uncle and have a shot at them for myself!" He leaned toward her. "It would be useful to find a nice engagement ring in the lot, don't you think? Do you prefer diamonds, sapphires, rubies or emeralds?"

"I detest all jewelry—apart from what one can sell it for," said Denise coolly. She rose, folding up her work. "Meanwhile, if you are going to hark back to forbidden subjects, it is time I returned to the house and my patient. Are you coming?"

He got up, shaking his head mournfully, and bowed her out of the summer-house. They had barely stepped across the threshold when they were confronted by a stranger, who had apparently circled the structure from the direction of the drive. He was young, well dressed, pleasant-looking, and his voice when he spoke was that of an educated man.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and took off a fine panama with a polite bow to Denise. "I was just on my way to the front door when I heard your voices, and I thought I might save somebody the trouble of answering a bell. I am looking for Mr. Barron."

Geoffrey was not too pleased at an incident that threatened to interrupt the privacy of his last few minutes with Denise Morand, but as he studied the intruder he could not help, despite his chagrin, being favorably impressed with the young man's personality. The tall figure, slender yet suggestive of wiry strength, the clean-shaved, well-modeled chin, the firm but good-humored lips, the clear gray eyes that were at once shrewd and kindly, were all very prepossessing. Geoffrey decided that the owner of these engaging physical features must be quite a decent fellow after all, and he manfully forgave him his innocent obtrusion upon a tête-à-tête that had just reached the subject of engagement rings.

"I am Mr. Barron's son," he answered slowly. "My father is at the house. If you will walk there with us I will call him."

"Oh—if you're his son, it may not be necessary to disturb him," answered the stranger quickly. "After all, I am here to make a very simple request. I've been staying at the Tarryville Arms for a few days, trying to get some fishing in the neighborhood, and I happened to hear of an excellent pool that is on your property. I'm leaving to-morrow noon, and I have called to ask if your father would object to my dropping a few flies on the pool early to-morrow morning."

"I'm sure he wouldn't. Yes, it's a good place for trout. I used to take some nice fish out of it myself, when I was a youngster, but I've grown lazy of late." From the corner of his eye he noted a restless little movement from Denise that meant she was about to leave, so, sighing inwardly, he continued outwardly courteous. "Of course you don't know the exact lo-

cation of the pool? If you care to stroll there with me now, I will show you the path that leads to it."

"You're very kind," murmured the tall young man. "There's nothing I'd like better. In fishing, you know, it helps tremendously to learn the lay of the land!"

## CHAPTER III

### ALLIGATOR POOL

PHILIP BARRON, after leaving Denise and his son to their own devices, resumed his interrupted way along the grassy border of the drive which led straight to the old green house. When he was within twenty yards of it, he stopped, raised his eyes and contemplated the home of his fathers reflectively. Sinister, eh? Now, why had that artist idiot felt that? Grim chapters in its history? He had been right enough there! The murder of William Barron by itself was about as grim a chapter as any house could show in its history.

The thought of still another terrible page in the book of the House of Barron crossed Philip's mind, but he put aside the memory with a shudder. The truth of *that* matter had been successfully hushed up, and only two or three people still lived who knew the facts. Philip heartily wished that he were not one of them.

The artist with a penchant for presentiments had gone on to say that the shadow of a coming tragedy was already hanging over the hapless home. Philip shrugged his shoulders. Sad things had happened and might happen again, but he flattered himself that he was too sane to sit up o' nights worrying about a stranger's premonitions. Of course, it was a queer coincidence that on the very same afternoon old Gorse should chance to caution him against feeling too sure

he would never need a private detective. Funny if it should turn out . . .

Resolutely he put the notion from him.

He went on slowly and managed to dismiss the possibility of serious catastrophes while he contemplated the probability of a minor one. This matter of Geoffrey and Denise Morand! Little incidents, barely observed at the time, began to come back to him! Click-click, went Philip's tongue against his teeth. A girl whose antecedents were unknown to any of them, a girl of whom they knew less than nothing—was it possible that Geoffrey could have become interested in her? Philip had to admit that it was quite within the realms of possibility. A consideration that might weigh with an older man could not have the same influence on a younger. With Geoffrey, it would be simply a case of her eyes, which were beautiful, of her nose, which was distinctly better than the nose of the average young woman, of her voice, which was agreeable even to an older ear, of her lustrous black hair—oh, it would be a question of anything but the things that really mattered! Philip Barron was not too old to understand youth.

In that case, what should he do? Send her away? If he decided to do that, what excuse could he give? Barring her attraction for Geoffrey, she was acceptable in every respect and a distinct acquisition to their little family circle. A downright pity to lose her . . .

*"Pshaw!"* said Philip Barron.

The mild expletive found him ascending the three steps to the front door of his house. This he opened with his latch-key, and stepped quietly into the cool twilight of the hall.

Mindful of his last words to Denise, he ascended the short flight of stairs that led to the upper story and went direct to his sister's room. The door was closed, and he listened a moment before softly entering. Only the sound of heavy, regular breathing came to his ear.

"Lydia!" he whispered.

No answer. She must be asleep. He advanced to the middle of the room and stood looking down at his sister.

Habituated as he was to the sight of her, he looked at her only with curiosity, interest and sympathy, but to any unaccustomed visitor the spectacle presented by the sleeping woman must have been horrifying in the extreme. She made a monstrous picture, more suggestive of a caricature by Cruikshank or Doré than anything human.

She was of enormous bulk, her unwieldy form amply filling a wheel-chair that had been made to order and that was easily twice the size of the largest procurable in the open market. If illness had paralyzed her from the waist down and at the same time weakened her mentally, it had left unimpaired an appetite that had been formidable since the day she was born. Debarred from any form of exercise, and stuffed to repletion with rich food three times a day, the soft flesh and fat had piled up on her large frame until it amounted to a burden that might well have staggered an elephant.

This ungainly mass was covered at present with a brown bath-robe which stretched from her ankles to her neck, buttoned the full length of the front from top to bottom. Her third chin concealed the topmost button; the next two chins, like a pair of terraces, led

easily up to a face that was perfectly round and about the size of a fair-sized griddle. A small snub nose and a narrow slit of a mouth did little to relieve the monotony of that vast expanse, which was only saved from mediocrity by the pronounced mustache of fine dark hair which sprouted above her lips. Presumably this was kindly Nature's compensation for a total lack of eyebrow and an almost total lack of hair. A few stringy wisps, beginning to turn gray, had been artfully arranged to cover as much of her head as might be—a kindly effort which Philip rightfully ascribed to Denise Morand.

No doubt his entrance had disturbed her slumber, for as he stood beside her she slowly opened her eyes—eyes of a blue so nearly colorless that they irresistibly reminded one of faded forget-me-nots. No spark of intelligence gleamed from their lack-luster shallows as they looked up into his.

"Lydia," he said quietly, "do you know me?"

"Yes, I know you. You are—you are . . ." Her voice was in some sort as disturbing as her appearance, for it was rough and harsh, and deep-toned as any man's.

"Yes, Lydia," said Philip encouragingly as she hesitated.

For an instant her mouth opened and shut soundlessly, like the mouth of a dying fish on a dock. Then a terrified expression came into the pale eyes and a babble of broken phrases burst from her lips.

"No—no, I don't know you. Who are you? I don't like you—I hate you. Go 'way, bad man. Go 'way. I want Denny. Where is my Denny? Send me my Denny or I'll cry!" She began a throaty whimpering.

"All right, Lydia; I will send Denny to you."

Philip Barron dropped a hand lightly on her shoulder before turning away; she seemed to cringe from his touch, and he sighed as he left the room in search of Denise.

His task proved unexpectedly simple. As he stepped into the hall, the girl appeared slowly ascending the stairs. He caught her eye and waved his hand back toward the sick-room, and when she nodded comprehendingly so that he knew she understood, he walked on down the hall toward the rear of the house. His eyes were troubled as he turned into a small room that served him as library and study; in revealing her fondness for Denise, his sister had still further complicated the problem of how that attractive young woman might be removed from the house.

He halted abruptly as he crossed the threshold of the study, his eyes wide as they rested on a somber figure in one corner of the room.

"Grant!" he said sharply. "What in the world are you doing there?"

The black-clad form jumped and stiffened perceptibly before it wheeled to face the speaker. Edward Grant, who had been butler to the Barrons for six years, was plainly taken aback by the sudden appearance of his master. His pasty white countenance and his small protruding eyes registered a distinct air of confusion before he was able to recover the facial opacity of a well-trained servant.

"I beg your pardon, sir! I didn't hear you come in, sir!"

"I thought you didn't," commented Philip dryly. He crossed the room and seated himself in a revolving

chair that was placed before a fine old mahogany desk, and swung around to face the butler. "What did you say you were doing?"

Grant held out one hand, in which he clutched a book, and a second that gripped a very dirty cloth. His mien now was politely deprecatory.

"I was just giving a bit of a dusting to the books along these shelves, sir. I've noticed several times that they need it badly, sir."

"They do, Grant, they do indeed. However, isn't that one of the duties of the housemaid?"

"Yes, sir, in a manner of speaking, sir, it is. But Susan has not been quite herself lately, sir, and some of her work has got behind."

"So you decided to help her out."

"Exactly, sir. I'm always willing——"

"Quite so. It is evident that yours is a noble character, Grant." The irony in Philip's voice was manifest, but the butler thought it best to bow politely. Philip did not speak again for an instant, during which his glance went past the servant and traveled slowly over the array of shelves packed solidly with books. They ran around two walls of the room and extended from the floor to the ceiling so that there must have been several thousand volumes in all. A smile twitched at the corner of Philip's lips. "Quite a lot of them, eh?"

"Yes, indeed, sir!" agreed the butler heartily.

"Quite a lot of 'em," resumed his master. "I dare say you will be surprised to learn that I'm familiar with them all—with every one of them, Grant!"

"Indeed, sir," remarked the man uneasily.

"I know them from cover to cover, Grant. I'll go

farther and include even the *bindings!* You'd never have thought me such a bookworm, eh?"

"I—I'm not sure I quite understand, sir——"

"Of course you don't, my poor fellow," said his master sympathetically. "How *could* you understand? Now, replace that book you have in your hand and be off about your own work down-stairs. When Miss Jocelyn comes in, tell her I'm here."

"Very good, sir." The butler made his escape with alacrity, drawing his dusty hand across a damp brow as soon as he was out of the room and thereby achieving an effect that quite startled a very pretty girl whom he met at the head of the stairs. "Oh—Miss Jocelyn, Mr. Barron is in his study."

"Thank you, Grant." She added with mild amusement. "For goodness' sake go wash your face! Mud pies at your age—the idea!"

Neither a college course nor its post-graduate fellow had dampened Miss Keith's youthful good spirits, nor had they turned her into a dried-up blue-stocking. She was tall, with a beautifully proportioned figure, and she was deliciously feminine from her pretty bronze shoes to the wealth of dark-red hair that was piled upon her shapely head. With her coloring and her creamy skin her eyes might well have been blue, but they were a soft brown instead with flecks of gold that had the effect of making them seem very bright.

"Hello, Uncle Phil!"

With a quick deftness of movement that was one of her characteristics, she was in the study, had dropped an affectionate kiss on his brow, had ruffled his hair with her slender fingers, had swung herself to a seated position on his desk, had rifled his cigarette-box of a

cigarette and lighted it almost before he knew she was in the room.

"Hello, Jocelyn, my dear. How was the bridge?"

"Lovely. I won fifteen cents."

"Magnificent. Be sure you invest it in Government bonds and don't squander it."

"What has happened?" demanded the girl suddenly, studying his face. "Something has—I can always tell when you wear that air of not knowing whether to be amused or annoyed."

"You describe my emotions exactly," said Philip, sighing as he smiled. "Did you meet Grant as you came in?"

"I did. What in the world happened to his face? Were you using it as a duster?"

"I don't know anything about his dashed face; it's his mind that is affected, poor devil."

*"Wh-wh-what!"*

"He's been bitten by the jewel-bug," said Philip mournfully. "He's done for."

"Oh!" cried the girl, her eyes round. "Who told him?"

"I can't imagine. Picked up the yarn in the village, maybe."

"Are you *sure*——?"

"My dear, I've seen the symptoms too often to be mistaken." He recounted the tale of the butler and the books, and she nodded her head in sad agreement as he finished. Philip sighed again. "He'll have to go. Once they get infected with the virus of treasure-hunting, they become impossible." His mind went back over the years. "Grant is the third. You don't remember Parsons, do you? You were scarcely more

than a child. Parsons got up one night and took the drawing-room fireplace to pieces, brick by brick, and he didn't get it together again before I was up in the morning and caught him at it. I forgave him, but two weeks later he started on the foundation pillars in the cellar, and then I felt he was becoming dangerous."

"And Matthew! Poor Matthew!" Jocelyn gave a little gurgle of mirth. "Do you remember the afternoon you discovered him under your bed, testing the floor boards?"

"Yes, I remember. We finally sacked Matthew after a two-day drought because he emptied the water-tank in the attic the better to examine its bottom. Good gracious, what don't the idiots think of!"

"It's a mercy none of them has thought to burn the house down in order to rake over the ashes."

They were silent for a minute or two, pondering the frailty of human nature. Jocelyn took another cigarette, thrust one between her uncle's lips and lighted them both. They smoked thoughtfully.

"After all—I wonder where they are?" It was Jocelyn who spoke, and she smiled reassuringly as her uncle gave a start and eyed her narrowly. "Oh, don't worry! I shan't dynamite the place just yet!"

"Better not."

"Don't you ever feel tempted—yourself—to look for them, Uncle Phil? We may deplore the curiosity of our servants, but after all it is only natural. There's something about hidden treasure that would set a mummy's pulse to beating."

"Don't I know it?" Philip Barron shook his head and smiled a twisted smile as he made confession. "Once—years ago—I spent many an hour trying to

figure out where the jewels might be. There's not a square inch of the building from cellar to attic that I didn't tap for a hollow sound! But my father's opinion finally came to have more and more weight with me; he said there was blood on them and they were better left alone. Lately—well, I admit I've been tempted again."

"Lately? Why?"

"Mostly on your account, my dear."

"*My* account! Goodness—*why?*"

"Well—you're a woman, and jewels belong most appropriately to women. Then, it would be nice if I could lay my hands on them in time to present them to you on—on your wedding-day!"

He sprang it on her deliberately, tentatively, and watched her face closely to see how she would react. To his annoyance, her candid eyes expressed first blank astonishment, and then unrestrained mirth. Her wedding-day? She threw back her head and laughed joyously.

"If that's all," she said finally, "you may save yourself the trouble of hunting for them for quite a while!" She slipped from the desk to her feet, gave him a hug and a kiss. "I'm going to stick around for a bit and take care of you, Uncle Phil!" She ruffled his hair again, then strolled idly to a window that overlooked the rear of the house. "I haven't seen the man yet that I'd care to marry," she said definitely.

As she finished she leaned forward and pressed her brow to the window-glass the better to look at something outside which had caught her attention. About fifty yards distant from the house, a straight row of beautiful weeping-willows marked the course of the

little river, and through a break in the trees a bare glimpse was to be had, from the window where she stood, of the famous pool that Penobscot had dubbed a lake. At one point on the farther bank, which was to be reached by a rustic bridge invisible from the house, a small round space had been cleared and leveled, and a pair of garden chairs and a little iron table invited the world to pause and rest, with book or writing-pad, in the cool shade of the overhanging branches. Jocelyn's curiosity had been aroused by the sight of two men standing in this retreat, only one of whom she recognized, looking at the water and talking.

"Hello," said the girl in an altered voice. "Has Geoffrey brought some one with him for the week-end? Or who is that bee-utiful stranger with whom he speaks by yonder river? It's nothing local, I'll swear to that!"

Philip left his desk and joined her. A glance out of the window enabled him to answer her question.

"No, Geoffrey has not brought any one with him. That chap is spending a few days at the Tarryville Arms. His name is Traynor, he's a famous New York detective, and he's up here for a bit of fishing and a rest after finishing a difficult case. I gleaned that from Gorse, and most of it is probably untrue."

"A detective! He doesn't look it."

"Exactly what I remarked to Gorse. However, he is not a police officer, but a private detective, and I believe a private detective is permitted to look like anything, or nothing at all."

"Well, this one looks like half a million dollars after the younger dancing men of Tarryville! Where did Geoffrey pick him up?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea."

"Well, I'm going to go down and find out," announced Miss Keith with decision. "You'll have to come with me, Uncle Phil, so I won't look too much like a forward minx! Say—what a gorgeous chance for you to run those jewels to earth! If he's anything like the detectives in fiction, he'd be able to locate them easily between now and dinner-time!"

"You will please refrain from mentioning the subject!" said her uncle severely. In process of being towed by one arm, he was already half-way down the back stairs. "Enough people know about them already."

"Just as you please," said his niece soothingly. They went rapidly through the kitchen and out the rear door, when she moderated her pace to a more dignified measure that enabled him to regain his breath as he walked beside her. "It's missing a golden opportunity, though!"

A minute later they were sedately crossing the bridge that led to the farther shore, and Jocelyn's gaze was apparently directed to every quarter other than where she was really looking. At the sound of their steps on the loose planking, Traynor turned his head toward them, and Jocelyn noticed that he fell back a step as if in surprise. She may have guessed that she made a picture of radiant, youthful beauty as she paused to look down into the water, but she did not realize the tremendous impression she had made on a cool and calculating young man who was by no means given to being impressed.

Introductions were effected. Philip remarked that he already had a bumping acquaintance with Mr.

Traynor, who apologized again for what he insisted was his own clumsiness at the post-office. Then he explained his presence and received from the older man an endorsement of Geoffrey's consent to his fishing, adding that he was returning to the city the following noon and would only trouble the trout in the early morning.

"You should have good luck," predicted Philip, eying the placid surface of the pool. "It must be years since any one has cast a fly over Alligator Pool. If you feel generous to-morrow, you might leave a portion of your spoils at the kitchen door for my breakfast."

"I'll do so with pleasure," promised Traynor, and as he was anxious to prolong a conversation that permitted him to gaze upon Jocelyn from the corner of his eye, he added, "By the way, the man who told me of this lovely spot also referred to it as Alligator Pool. It struck me at the time as being a queer name for these latitudes; is there a story connected with it?"

"Oh, yes," answered Philip with a little chuckle. "There is a story connected with nearly everything about this old place; some time I propose to gather them into a guide-book and then admit visitors at a quarter a head!

"When my father, Penobscot Barron, was a young man, alligator-skin was both fashionable and expensive. There were large profits in the business, too, since it cost the gator little to grow the skin while he could sell it for a very handsome price indeed." Philip chuckled again, for this was one of his favorite anecdotes. "My father traveled considerably for those times, and it happened that he found his way to Florida one winter. He met people who were raising

alligators for the market and he learned how inexpensive the skins were on the hoof. He bought two gators, male and female, and brought them home, intending to start a nice little alligator farm in his own back yard.

"He put an iron picket fence around this pool, including its inlet and outlet, and tossed his treasures into the enclosure. For winter, he planned a small, artificially-heated house with a tank of warm water, a project that may seem absurd to us now but which was amply justified then by the fantastic prices paid for the hides. My father, who was really far shrewder than you might suspect from this story, settled back for his profits to hatch—just as thousands of chicken-ranchers are doing at this very moment!

"Unfortunately, the lady alligator died almost immediately from indigestion, brought on possibly by a rich diet of frogs eaten too green. My father sent for a duplicate, but she died in transit.

"Meanwhile, the male animal thrived and grew apace. At last he became troublesome. His appetite was Gargantuan. A leg of lamb was an hors-d'œuvre, a porterhouse steak merely an entrée. He was an expensive boarder.

"That was not the worst of it. You see, when my father built the grille to keep the alligator in, he entirely forgot to build it to keep other animals out. Four valuable setter pups leaked through it and were seen no more. A setting of thirteen prize pheasant eggs hatched out complete, and while my father was still congratulating himself on this success, the alligator was swallowing thirteen times and licking its lips—if alligators do lick their lips. *Do* they, Mr. Traynor?"

"Frankly, I don't know," said Traynor, enthralled by the story and a profile view of Jocelyn Keith. "Aren't they more apt to wag their tails?"

"Possibly. At all events, the climax came when my mother's favorite cat, a magnificent Persian, disappeared. It was a very affectionate animal, tender and playful, and the supposition has always been that it entered the enclosure for a friendly romp with the alligator. The theory was borne out by the subsequent discovery of long silver hairs adhering to the snout of Ponce de Leon."

"Er—pardon me—did you say Ponce de Leon?"

"The alligator, Mr. Traynor, the alligator! Had I meant the explorer I would not have referred to his snout. My father named the animal after the first and greatest of Florida promoters."

"An apt and thoughtful gesture," approved Traynor. He caught Jocelyn's amused eye, and his own twinkled in response. "Please go on, sir."

"There is little more. Business is business, but no woman can be expected to sacrifice her pet cat to its furtherance without making a protest. The alligator's doom was sealed, his banishment decreed. Poor Ponce, a victim to his appetite for dainties, was sold to a circus that was playing near by. The iron railing about his home was torn down and only my father was left to mourn his going.

"Since then, Mr. Traynor, this has been known as Alligator Pool, but there are no alligators in it now. What's more, sir, if I ever catch one in it I promise you it will go hard with him; I have a favorite cat myself!"

## CHAPTER IV

### CONSPIRACY

"I do think, Uncle Phil, that you might have asked him to stay to dinner," said Jocelyn reproachfully when Traynor had finally made his adieus. "You know what the cooking is at the Tarryville Arms! I tried to give you a hint. Didn't you notice me when I got behind him and made a face like eating?"

"Oh, was that what you were doing? I thought you were impersonating a love-sick alligator fawning over its mate, and I wondered why. You're a wretched pantomimist, Jocelyn. Really, I can't see the use of an expensive college education to a woman if she can't imitate a dinner invitation better than that. Suppose you were starving in a foreign country——"

"Why *didn't* you ask him to stay?"

"Why *should* I?" retorted her uncle with some asperity. "We don't know anything about him. For all we know, he might chalk a mark on the gate as he left and then we'd have to dine every strolling fisherman that wandered by for the next ten years. You can't take risks like that."

"Well, I thought him rather amusing and very nice."

Mr. Barron, who had noticed something of the sort in her attitude toward the stranger, congratulated himself on his perspicacity and on the fact that Mr. Traynor was leaving the neighborhood on the morrow. Of

course there might be nothing in it, but from the point of view of a prudent matchmaker he could not see the virtue of having another Romeo in the field. Content with his good-generalship, he slipped his hand affectionately under Jocelyn's arm.

"There's Grant staring at us hopefully from the kitchen door," he said. "Come along, dinner-face; you've made me quite hungry!"

Traynor proved himself not only an excellent fisherman but a man of his word to boot. When Hilda Svenson, the cook, descended in the morning and opened the back door to take in the milk, she discovered four handsome trout reposing upon a strip of birch-bark and covered neatly with fresh green grass and leaves. A faint feeling of resentment moved in her breast at the sight, but it passed when she explored a little farther and found that the amiable angler had opened and cleaned them with a thoroughness that was highly commendable. She broiled them nicely for breakfast, and sent them to the dining-room with a visiting-card which had lain on top of their temporary tomb.

Philip Barron read it, essayed to slip it into his pocket and finally handed it reluctantly to his niece in response to her demand. He consoled himself with the reflection that the fellow was on the point of leaving Tarryville and that they would never lay eyes on him again.

"I see old Gorse was right after all," exclaimed Jocelyn, glancing at the card. "'James Traynor. Private Inquiry Agent. Park Row Building.' So he really is a detective! I was dying to ask him, but it seemed too personal a question."

"I admire your reserve," commented Geoffrey with a broad grin. "I suppose it was perfectly proper to ask him if he were married and if he liked to dance as well as fish. Those are not personal questions, but refer to matters of wide public interest——"

"Don't be silly, Geoff! You know perfectly well that those questions cropped up casually in the course of conversation. Hello, here's something on the other side!" She turned the card and read aloud a few lines penciled on the back in a neat but firm hand. " 'Hope you enjoy eating these as much as I did catching them. Was unable to raise an alligator; I had no cat for bait! Thanks for letting me fish the pool. J. T.' "

"What in the world does he mean about an alligator?" asked Denise Morand, and for the sake of changing the conversation Philip was only too glad to recount the story for the second time in fourteen hours.

They lingered long at table that morning, far too long for the butler, who had fish of his own that were not trout to fry. Grant thought they would never finish, and he visioned himself arriving late for an appointment that he must keep at ten-thirty. Mr. Barron's rearmost heel had barely cleared the threshold of the dining-room before the butler was whisking the silver and china from the table to the pantry, where he pointed out to the housemaid that she must help him wash up a great deal quicker than she usually did if she did not wish to incur his grave displeasure.

"For the land's sake, Mr. Grant," protested the flustered Susan, "what's the hurry all about?"

"I've got to meet a—a friend in the village," snapped the butler. "Never mind—do as I tell you!"

Despite their haste, it was nearly ten o'clock before they finished. Then the butler was stricken aghast by the sudden appearance of Jocelyn Keith, pencil and notebook in hand. The girl had felt restless since breakfast, in no mood to settle down to a book, letters or sewing, and eventually decided that it was a good morning for her to do something really useful. The only thing that occurred to her was to check over the household silver with Grant, and check it she did while the butler writhed inwardly with impatience. His brow was moist with perspiration as he hunted for one teaspoon which refused to be found, and he nearly burst into tears when Jocelyn finally remembered that it was up-stairs on her own bedside table. At last he was free!

He changed his house-coat for a garment more appropriate for outdoor wear, instructed Susan to say, if asked, that he had a headache and had gone for a breath of air, and hurriedly departed up the road in the direction of Tarryville. He did not go as far as the village, however, but turned up a side road and followed it until he came to a wayside copse of trees and underbrush, into which he plunged eagerly.

In the center of this sheltered and secluded spot sat a short and stocky individual, watch in hand. He had gray hair, a strong face that was yet rather mean, keen eyes that were steady but somehow insincere, thin lips and large coarse ears. His clothing was shabby. The straw hat he wore was battered and discolored by the vicissitudes of many summers, and his suit was threadbare and richly stained. Nevertheless, he had about him an air of strength and authority which was manifest at this moment in the heavy frown with which

he glanced from his time-piece to the breathless butler.

"Late again!" he snapped.

Grant shook his head apologetically for an instant, a hand clutched to his side as he strove for breath.

"I couldn't help it, sir!" he managed to gasp at length. "I couldn't, Mr. Barron, indeed I couldn't, sir! I was just going to leave when Miss Jocelyn came into the pantry, sir, and nothing would do but she must check over the silver. I hurried, sir——"

"Never mind your excuses; you have a fresh set every time. Have you anything to report?"

"I've been active, sir, most active. There's scarcely a spot I've left untouched——"

"Except the right one, I'll warrant," grunted Sidney Barron disdainfully. "I was a fool ever to think you could help me!" He pounded savagely with one fist on his knee. "Oh, if only I could get in there and see things with my own eyes instead of through yours! Did you receive my note telling you to search the books in the study?"

"Yes, sir! Oh, yes, sir, I received it. Under pretense of dusting them, sir, I have been going through them steadily." For an instant the butler contemplated the advisability of telling Sidney that he had been caught in the act by the master of the house, but when he visioned the torrent of abuse that the confession would certainly bring down upon his head he put the idea from him with a shudder. "I will finish them soon, sir, indeed I will, but I do not believe we shall find anything, sir."

"Your beliefs are not important," commented the other acidly. "Listen, now, drop the books for the time being and have a careful look over that desk. Be

still, do! You needn't tell me that you've examined it from the top to the bottom already; do as I tell you, and search it again. That desk was my grandfather's as well as my father's, and two generations ago those old fellows were cunning about making places of concealment. The jewels themselves are not in the study—we searched every inch of it when father died—so his using the word study in connection with them can only mean that some paper relating to their whereabouts is concealed in that small room. I've figured that out and I'm sure I'm right."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure you are, sir. You've a head on you——"

"Shut up!" said Sidney, who had been talking more to himself than to his cat's-paw. "You search that desk again!"

"Very good, sir, I will indeed, sir!" Grant hesitated, then summoned his courage and faltered a question which he had long desired to ask. "Excuse me, sir—I'm interested in these jewels—I'm only human and it's natural for a man to be curious—could you give me any idea, just in a rough way, sir, of—of what they might be *worth?*"

"Ha! So you think to find them and keep them for yourself, and you'd like to know what they're worth so's you won't be too badly diddled by your fence! Eh? Is that your game?"

"Oh, my dear sir, my dear Mr. Barron, how can you think such a thing of me!" cried the butler, wincing from a chance shot that had scored a neat bull's-eye. He had every intention of double-crossing his illicit employer if fortune favored him. "I'd be foolish to try it, sir——"

"You would, but I'm not sure you've sense enough to know it. Stupid ass—do you suppose you could get more from a fence than from me? A jail sentence is what you'd get before you finished! Your best bet, if you find them, is to bring them straight to me and get the reward I have promised you," continued Sidney, who had no slightest intention of parting with a penny to his henchman. "Now—be off. You've your work to do, and I have mine. Report here Tuesday morning without fail."

"I will, sir, indeed I will!"

The butler escaped from the awe-inspiring presence of his second master and resumed his way to the village of Tarryville, where he had a small marketing errand to do for the cook. It was a very hot day even for September, when blazing days are possible, and his heart was yet palpitant from his earlier exertions. He walked slowly, mopping his face as he went.

He felt a slight disappointment at not having extracted an estimate of the value of the jewels from the cautious and sapient Sidney, but he told himself that even if he were defrauded in disposing of them he must still receive a considerable sum—enough to keep him in comfort for the rest of his life if he were not too extravagant.

In spite of the heat, he shivered a bit as he thought of double-crossing a person as dangerous as Sidney, but on the other hand, he had little confidence in Sidney's good faith. What could a poor devil of a butler do if his patron refused to pay him for goods he had stolen? Go to the police? Mmph!

There were times when Grant heartily wished that Sidney Barron had never waylaid him that morning

in July and thrilled his ear with the tale of the Barron jewels. It was a wearing business, and there had been a look of "month's-wages-in-lieu-of-notice" about Philip's face the previous afternoon. Was he to lose a good job for a will-o'-the-wisp?

Yet, there was the excitement of the chase! To think that a small fortune in jewels lay within reach of the man clever enough to find them! It was worth risking something!

Fatigued no less by his emotions than by his physical exercise, he rested a moment by the roadside. Paradoxically, his very feebleness encouraged him to fortitude. He was no longer young, his health was wretched, his days were drear. To compass wealth at a stroke! It was his only hope of happiness, and like many a better man before him he urged himself to persevere along the crooked path that seems to lead faster to the goal than the straight and narrow one of virtue. He rose from his brief rest and doggedly resumed his way.

It was four o'clock that afternoon before the coast was clear enough to satisfy his timid spirit.

Philip Barron had just left for his stroll to town, Geoffrey departed for a walk, and Jocelyn had gone for a game of tennis at the country club. Susan and the cook were napping in their rooms. Denise Morand was in attendance upon her patient, whom the heat of the day had apparently made refractory. Now was his opportunity!

He slipped into the study, and mindful of the instructions from Sidney, whose mind he quite understood was cleverer than his own, he ignored the shelves of books that still remained unexplored and

fastened his attention on the desk that had descended to this generation from William Barron's time. He was not in an optimistic mood. Plain, solid, square, easy to measure inside and out, how could this simple piece of furniture retain any secret after the many examinations to which it had been subjected?

He sat down in the revolving chair and fixed his eyes on the unresponsive mahogany. His wits baffled, he was ready to wait upon inspiration.

His mind almost hypnotized by his fierce concentration, he did not realize the fact when presently the muscles of his throat tightened to some passing irritation and he coughed. Understanding came to him when the noise of a light footfall in the hall followed upon the cacophonous sound.

He was on his feet instantly, busy with a rag and a can of polish that he had providently brought with him. He stooped to his labor and straightened again with an excellent start of surprise when Denise Morand's voice came from the doorway.

"Oh—it's you, Grant!"

"Yes, Miss Morand."

"I heard somebody in here and came to see who it was." She regarded the butler with a half-smile. "You are always busy, Grant."

"Yes, Miss Morand. There's plenty to do about a house, and especially if it's an old one."

"Well, I mustn't interrupt you, I suppose!"

She withdrew, giving him a friendly nod as she turned away.

Immediately upon her disappearance, the butler almost fell upon the desk from the intensity of his feelings.

*He had found it!*

He had found the hiding-place! Within two inches of his fat white hand lay the clue to a hidden treasure! He knew it as surely as if the precious paper were already clutched in his curling fingers! And to think it had been there all along!

He worked fast. Fifteen minutes later, all evidence of his depredation removed, he was leaving the house hurriedly by the rear door, his destination the little clearing on the farther bank of the pool. He often went there of an afternoon to read the morning journal and to get a breath of air, and now it appealed to him as being the most secure retreat from prying eyes. He walked swiftly, heedless of the beating of his heart, thinking only of the paper, yellowed by time, which crackled in his breast pocket, and when he had reached his goal he was trembling from head to foot and breathing in painful gasps.

With shaking fingers he drew the precious document forth and spread it open on his knee. So old it was, so fragile in the creases, he did not dare to hold it in his uncertain hands lest their agitation should rend it apart. He bent his head and peered eagerly at a cramped writing, not easy to decipher in itself.

And the message? His heart sank as he grasped its text. A boyhood memory stirred in him—a memory that dated back to the days when he had wriggled impatiently in his seat during Sunday-school. What was that phrase? Dead Sea—Dead Sea—ah! Dead Sea fruit! That was it! Luscious to the eye, ashes within!

"Right from the crane—eight—up six—left three."

That was all, and what could a man make of a mess like that? Gibberish! A crane, he knew well,

was a bird with a long beak, and where in Tarryville did such an animal exist?

He bent his head over the aggravating script. Fifteen minutes went by—twenty—thirty.

For the assurance of even greater privacy he had turned the chair in which he sat so that his back was to the house and the paper out of sight. This meant, since he was on the farther shore, that his back was turned to the pool also, and by consequence of that fact, together with his rapt interest in the enigma on his knee, he was quite unaware of an amazing event that began to march behind him.

First, the calm water of the pool was disturbed beneath its surface. Then a series of small ripples arrived to mar its serenity, and through the center of them rose a long dark snout. At its forward end were only two gaping red nostrils, and farther back were two small, glassy, evil-looking eyes that fixed themselves upon the figure of the unsuspecting butler.

Silently, this extraordinary apparition glided ever nearer to the shelving bank until at last it quitted the water and lay stretched at full length—some eight feet or more from the head to the tip of its tail—on the soft earth of the shore. A second or two it rested, motionless and menacing, while it appeared to be watching the still figure in the chair.

Then it crawled slowly toward him, propelling itself by two short front legs, and at the same moment it opened its ugly snout to reveal a red gullet framed in long gleaming teeth.

From a distant hillside came a mighty shout of warning.

## CHAPTER V

### LAUGHTER IN COURT

JOCELYN, at the country-club, played a fast and furious three-set match against another girl; flushed with victory and hot as the equator, she seated herself at the finish on the cool veranda of the club-house and relaxed contentedly, a tall, tinkling glass of lemonade at her elbow. She was at peace with the world, and she might have been pardoned for the face she made when a waiter came out to tell her that she was wanted on the phone. She rose reluctantly and followed him slowly into the office of the building.

Three minutes later she came running out again like a whirlwind; her erstwhile opponent, waiting for her with a lemonade of her own, gasped with surprise when Miss Keith dashed down the front steps with never a word of explanation or farewell, jumped into her car and drove off at a furious pace.

She covered the distance between the club and Lakeside at a rate of speed that would have shocked the selectmen of Tarryville had they seen her. She took the turn at the Barron gate with a skid and two wiggles, whirled up the drive to the house and came to a screaming halt before the front door. As she did so, Geoffrey Barron lounged around the corner of the building and came strolling up.

"Geoffrey! What has happened?"

"Happened? Where?"

"Here, of course! Denise just telephoned to me. She said she couldn't find either you or Uncle Phil!"

"I've been taking a walk," explained Geoffrey as she paused for breath. "Just got back this minute. What about Denise? If she phoned, I suppose it didn't happen to her. Cool off, Jocelyn, and tell me what it's all about." He wiped his heated countenance as he spoke.

"Grant—the butler! It's—it's terrible!"

"Grant? Don't tell me he's gone off with the silver! I never did like——"

"Geoffrey—don't talk like that! He's—he's *dead!*"

"Dead! Grant! What *was* it?"

"I—I only know what Denise told me. They found him dead by the pool. Killed by—by an *alligator!*"

"Jocelyn! See here, child, what did you have at the club——?"

"Don't be silly. I'm telling you just what she said. She was too excited to talk clearly, but she certainly told me that he was found dead beside the pool and that an alligator killed him!"

"Denise Morand," said Geoffrey thoughtfully, "is a woman whose intelligence I have hitherto respected. What occurred after he was killed by an alligator—was he snatched up to heaven by blue angels with pink wings? Alligator!"

Jocelyn did not reply. Followed by Geoffrey, she hurried up the steps and into the front hall.

If any doubt still existed in their minds as to the genuineness of the alarm it must have been dissipated by the somber silence that reigned through the house. Geoffrey lingered in the entrance to shout for Denise, but the only response came in a quavering bass voice from up-stairs.

"Denny! I want my Denny! Where is my Denny?"

"Come on!" cried Jocelyn, clutching at his elbow. "She said it was by the pool; everybody must be there! I wonder if Uncle Phil has turned up yet."

They went swiftly through empty rooms and passages, then an empty kitchen and finally came into the open again by way of the back door. Ahead of them, the scene of the drama came into view.

"There's Doctor Hendricks," said Geoffrey as he noticed a portly figure bending over a second that lay prostrate on the ground. "Denise evidently called him before she did you." He grunted. "Hello—who's the little fat man in knickers?"

"Never saw him before."

They crossed the bridge and joined the group that was gathered about the physician and the body. There was Hilda Svenson, her eyes starting from her head; there was Susan, the housemaid, apparently on the verge of hysterics; there was George Hart, a gardener and handy man employed by Philip for outdoor work; there was the "little fat man in knickers," standing off to one side with an air of grievance; there was finally Denise Morand. She stood away, too, and at sight of her face, Geoffrey hastened to her side.

"Denise! Are you ill?"

"No. Not ill. Just—terribly shocked!" As though her knees had suddenly given away, she sat down with an effect of collapse on one of the chairs. "I'll be all right in a minute. After I got through telephoning I—I just seemed to play out!"

"Nervous reaction, you poor child. Take it easy for a while, and later I'll get Hendricks to give you some sort of a bracer."

The doctor straightened from his task at this moment. He looked around the interested circle and nodded cheerfully to the latest comers.

"Hello, Geoff! Hello, Jocelyn! Sad business, eh?"

"He's—gone?" whispered the girl.

"Yes, poor fellow. Heart failure." Hendricks stooped to brush at the grass stains on his knees. "Been coming a long time. Heart was rotten. Something happened this afternoon—over-exertion probably——"

*"Alligator!"* barked a fierce voice behind him.

"Ah, yes, of course—forgot you were there, sir. Mr. Geoffrey Barron—Miss Keith—this is Mr. Perry Johnson. Yes, of course, Mr. Johnson—an alligator." The soothing note in the doctor's voice appeared strangely to infuriate the little fat man in knickers. His round face grew dangerously red, and there was a wild look in his eye that suggested a violent desire to begin jumping up and down where he stood. "Mr. Johnson," continued the physician, addressing Geoffrey with a droop of his off-eyelid, "has offered a very simple explanation of Grant's death—says he was scared by an alligator. Yes—an alligator."

The thought was so preposterous that Geoffrey and Jocelyn with one accord turned to look curiously at Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Johnson, aware of that regard and sensitive to its quality, turned from red to purple. His angry eyes finally came to rest upon Geoffrey.

"Young man, I have had the pleasure of meeting your father, if you are Mr. Philip Barron's son. I will make a full statement of what I have seen to him, if he will hear me, but I will not do so in this—this present company! I will merely repeat that I distinctly saw an alligator crawl out of this pool and approach a man

who was sitting in a chair with his back to the water. By the time I got here, the beast had disappeared and the man lay dead. Believe me or not, as you please."

"I believe in your sincerity," said Geoffrey, "but really——" He broke off, bewildered by his nonsense about an alligator and at the same time almost painfully conscious of the dead man at their feet. He turned to the doctor with a gesture. "Say—can't we take him into the house?"

"Certainly. By all means. I'll accept the responsibility for that. Cause of death is perfectly clear, but I'll notify the county authorities at once. If Maybury, the coroner, wants to hold an inquest he can let us know."

So, to the relief of Geoffrey and Jocelyn at least, the present incident ended. Perry Johnson went off in some dudgeon, promising to call upon Mr. Barron that evening; the cook and the housemaid fled to the house as George Hart turned up with an improvised litter; Geoffrey and he between themselves managed the difficult matter of transporting the dead man to the privacy of his bedroom; Jocelyn walked to the front gate to meet her uncle on his return from town, and Denise Morand, pale but composed, refused the doctor's ministrations and went back to her charge in the big wheel-chair.

Doctor Hendricks, still muttering "alligator" at intervals, departed in his speedy little runabout for Weyburn; Philip Barron, coming from Tarryville, consequently did not meet him, and the first news of the tragedy reached him from Jocelyn, waiting for him by the gate. He took off his hat, partly from a feeling of respect for death and partly because he could think

better if he was able to scratch his head, and sat down on a stone bench near the gate. He made Jocelyn tell him all she knew.

"Rather awkward," he commented. "I must go through the poor fellow's belongings at once and see if I can locate relatives who should be notified. Hilda may know something of them, or Susan. Tut-tut-tut!" The ejaculation was kindlier and more sympathetic than its usual connotation. "What's this infernal nonsense about an alligator? Funny—I had a chat with this Johnson person just yesterday. He's loony. He said—er—he said——"

"What did he say, Uncle Phil?"

"Confound him! He had the impertinence to tell me that he had a premonition of some sinister event hanging over our house!"

"Oh!" said Jocelyn, "that is rather queer." She reflected, her white brow wrinkling prettily, and then her clear young brain arrived safely at a sane conclusion. "He hasn't scored very brilliantly, Uncle Phil; it's too bad about Grant, but people do have to die some time of something, and a butler dropping dead from heart disease is sad but hardly sinister."

"You're quite right, my dear," said Philip Barron, thankful for her comfortable decision. "But—dash him—this alligator stuff!"

"That could be explained by a doctor—psychologist—I believe. Of course, I've only the haziest knowledge of these phenomena. But we know he was expecting something 'sinister,' as he calls it, and we may suppose that somewhere in this neighborhood he had heard the story of Alligator Pool. When he actually witnessed a man fall dead, his 'premonition' complex

and his subconscious memory got busy together and flashed a picture of an alligator to his brain. In his excitement he supposed that he actually saw it with his eyes."

"Splendid! I haven't a doubt in the world that you've hit it right on the nose!" Mr. Barron shook his head sympathetically. "I told him that his premonitions came from his liver, and now it would seem that he ought to have his eyes examined, if not his brain. It's perfectly evident that the poor chap is in a bad way."

This was the attitude which Philip carried to his interview with the incensed artist when, after a gloomy meal served in hysterical fashion by a tearful Susan, he went to the drawing-room to receive his visitor.

"I felt it my duty to come and see you," said Mr. Johnson.

"It's very good of you. I know you have had a most extraordinary experience, Mr. Johnson, and I'm quite anxious to hear your account of it." Unhappily, the same soothing note was apparent in Philip's voice that had marked the doctor's speech in the afternoon; Mr. Johnson stiffened belligerently in his chair and his hands gripped its arms tensely. "Something about an alligator, wasn't it?" added Barron encouragingly.

If there were a medal for examples of distinguished self-restraint, as there really should be, Mr. Perry Johnson would have richly deserved it at that moment. He did not froth at the mouth, he did not gnash his teeth, he did not even throw anything at the kindly eyes that were regarding him so sympathetically. He merely sat very still until he was sure that his fear of an immediate attack of apoplexy was unfounded.

"I will tell you exactly what happened and then wish you good evening, leaving you to draw your own conclusions," he announced, in a voice so icy that it would have made a glacier shiver.

"I was sitting this afternoon exactly where you saw me yesterday, and I was working on the canvas of your house. The light was excellent, the air remarkably clear. I had a distinct view of my subject and also of that pool in the river, which comes into the foreground of my composition. Everything about me was peaceful, and although I was still impressed by the sinister quality of the house, I was never farther in my life from suspecting an impending tragedy.

"About four o'clock, a man came out of the kitchen door and hurried across the little bridge that leads to the clearing on the farther bank of the pool. I say hurried, because I noticed particularly that he was almost going at a dog-trot and it struck me as curious that a man dressed in dark clothes should exert himself so strenuously on a very hot day. I took it that something must have agitated him, but of course I had no interest in that matter, so I gave it no further thought. I saw him sit down in one of those chairs, his back to the river. He drew something from his pocket—it might have been a piece of cloth, or paper—rested it on his knee and appeared to regard it attentively. I went on with my painting, and perhaps thirty minutes passed.

"Then, happening to glance from my canvas toward the house, I was aware of a considerable disturbance in the pool. Some object had broken the surface of the water and was drifting toward the shore. I supposed at first that a submerged log had escaped its anchorage

and bobbed up, but the next instant I was forced to change my opinion. When it reached the bank, it left the water and crawled up on the grass.

"The moment I got a good look at it I knew what it was. Mr. Barron—*it was an alligator!*"

He paused on a note of frank pugnacity. Clearly, he expected some evidence of doubt or derision on the part of his audience and was prepared to resent it hotly. Philip, however, was careful to display no such provocative symptom. He merely coughed slightly, fanned himself gently with a newspaper that he picked up from a near-by table and studiously refrained from meeting Mr. Johnson's belligerent eye. There are people, he reminded himself, whom one does not rashly antagonize, since it is never possible to say when their weakness may take a homicidal turn.

"The sight literally staggered me," resumed the artist more peaceably when no invidious comment was forthcoming. "You've heard persons described as sitting with their mouths open? It's a wonder the easel in front of me didn't fall into mine!

"Then, the fearful potentialities of the situation flashed across my mind. That man in the chair, unconscious of his danger! Just as the creature started to crawl toward him, I sprang to my feet and gave a loud shout of warning. I'm sure your butler heard me, for just as I began to run down the hill I saw him jump up from his chair.

"There's a dip in the land and a lot of small trees, as you know, and I could not see anything more until I reached the actual scene of events. Grant—I understand that was his name—was lying face down on the turf. The animal had disappeared.

"I shouted again, hoping to attract the attention of some one in the house. Then I knelt beside the man—you may be sure I kept my face toward the pool—and turned him over on his back. A servant-girl appeared at the back door and I called to her to send at once for a doctor, as a single glance showed me that the man was either dead or in a state of collapse.

"A few minutes later a young woman joined me. It was Miss Morand. She heard my account of what had happened, and I'll pay her the compliment of saying that she has been the only one so far with brains enough to recognize the truth when she hears it! She was properly shocked, and she hurried off to telephone to you or your son.

"That is all, sir. I will not quarrel with your doctor's diagnosis of heart disease, but I do insist that he was frightened to death by the sudden appearance of that alligator. Meanwhile, you may take my word for it that the river, and more particularly your pool, contains a frightful menace for any child or animal that approaches it. It lies now with your conscience to say what steps shall be taken to rid the neighborhood of such a terror."

"Yes, yes, of course," agreed Philip hastily. "Perhaps not my conscience, Mr. Johnson—it seems more in line with the duties of the police, don't you think? Anyway, you may rest assured that proper precautions will be taken by the authorities. We are law-abiding folk here in Weyburn County and it shall never be said that an alligator at large was permitted to ravage the countryside while——"

"Will there be an inquest?" interrupted Mr. Johnson harshly.

"I am confident there will. Maybury—our coroner—fairly dotes on them. If there were no other material, and if the public funds would permit, he would hold nine inquests on every dead cat to determine just what ended each of its lives. You have known men like that in the course of your——"

"I've known a great many peculiar characters," said the artist, rising abruptly, "but this afternoon has convinced me that I have still much to learn. With your permission, Mr. Barron, I will bid you good evening."

Philip escorted him to the door, and sighed as he closed it after him. He liked to make a pleasant impression upon people, even lunatics, and he did not feel that he had succeeded with Mr. Perry Johnson.

Two days later, as he had predicted, there was an inquest into the circumstances surrounding the sudden death of Edward Grant, late a member of the household of Mr. Philip Barron. It was held in the Tarryville Funeral Parlors, whither the body of the unfortunate butler had been taken, and it was attended by every one who could squeeze into the large front room. In one far corner sat Sidney Barron, and neither his presence nor the grimly thoughtful expression on his face was missed by Philip.

The coroner, a sharp-featured individual with twinkling eyes, surveyed his court with appreciation. As he opened the inquest, he cocked an eye at Haskell, the reporter from the *Weyburn Star,* as if to warn him that something good was coming. Haskell smiled back, and sharpened his spare pencil.

The viewing of the body by the jury, the formal identification by Philip, the medical testimony by the

county physician, all proceeded in swift and decorous fashion. The interest really began with the evidence of the county sheriff, increased with certain testimony from Philip, who was recalled to the stand, and culminated with the statement of the unhappy Mr. Johnson, who began to realize that life is not all beer and skittles for an honest man trying to do his duty. Three times before he ended, Haskell had written in neat brackets "Laughter in court," and the coroner's cross-examination was yet to come.

"It was a very hot day, Mr. Johnson? Yes. You were sitting in the sun? Quite so. Hallucinations—eh? No? You're really *sure* you saw an alligator? Um. Mr. Barron has told us of a conversation in which you admitted that you were subject to premonitions; *are* you subject to premonitions, Mr. Johnson?"

"To premonitions, sir, yes—but not to alligators!" snapped the artist, getting back a bit of his own. While suppressed laughter shook the spectators, Haskell wondered if he might close his description of the inquest with the venerable phrase "a good time was enjoyed by all," but decided that under the circumstances it would be in bad taste. "I may add," continued the painter frostily, "that I never drink."

"We all know that drinking is impossible since prohibition," said the coroner, scoring the next laugh. "Now, sir, just one more thing; I understood you to say that the deceased was interested in a piece of paper, or cloth, that he was holding on his knee. Yes? Thank you. Now, when you reached his side, did you find any such piece of paper or cloth?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Ah! You would have noticed had it been there?"

"I believe so. Anything of that nature in his hand or on the ground would almost certainly have caught my eye."

"Quite so. Who was the first person to join you beside the dead man?"

"A young lady from the house—a Miss Morand."

"Ah!" The coroner's eye roved the crowded room. "Everybody in Weyburn and Tarryville seems to be here—no doubt Miss Morand is present. Will she oblige me by standing up? Oh—thank you, Miss Morand! Step this way. Officer, swear Miss Morand, please. Good. Now, Miss Morand, will you tell us if, when you reached the scene, you noticed any piece of paper, or cloth, knocking about?"

"I saw nothing of the kind." Denise Morand was pale but composed. "I was there some minutes talking to Mr. Johnson, and I am positive I would have noticed anything of the kind if it had been there."

"Thank you. That is all. A very clear and definite statement." The coroner turned back to the artist. "You have heard Miss Morand; can you suggest what might have become of that paper, or cloth?"

"I can not."

"You're *sure* you saw it, Mr. Johnson?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Then," said the coroner, with an air of deep satisfaction, "we may feel assured of its fate. It was undoubtedly carried off by the alligator!"

When the ensuing laughter had subsided, the perspiring and fuming artist was excused. The sheriff was called to the stand to detail certain of his activities, and finally the coroner summed up, briefly and pleasantly.

He reminded the jury of the medical testimony in respect to the physical condition of the deceased prior to his death. The weather in itself had been extremely enervating the past few days. Deceased had been seen hurrying—"almost at a dog-trot"—to the spot where he had presently collapsed. It was axiomatic that people with heart disease who over-exert themselves are asking for trouble.

As for the alligator, he thought the jury would be able to estimate that theory at its full value. Mr. Johnson had given his testimony clearly and with palpable honesty; no one would wish to impugn his veracity for a moment, but there was such a thing as a man being honestly mistaken. Our eyes can play queer tricks on us—they can show us many forms of reptilian life ("If order can not be maintained I shall have to clear this court of spectators!") and also papers, or bits of cloth, that presently vanish.

Nevertheless, continued the charge, the jury had learned from the sheriff of their county that even the possibility of Mr. Johnson's being right had not been overlooked. That devoted official, together with three deputies, had exhaustively examined the pool and the river on the previous day and had discovered no saurian traces on either bank for a distance of some miles in both directions. Inquiries had been made and it had been determined that there was no circus or traveling show within a radius of a hundred miles from which such an animal might have escaped. Under these circumstances, the community might justly lay aside any fear that it might be entertaining on behalf of its children or pets; he, the coroner, felt sure that no alligator existed in the county.

The jury might retire if they wished, he concluded, but he would be surprised if they brought in a verdict of death from anything but natural causes.

The jury did not retire. The afternoon was drawing in, a human desire for supper began to make itself felt and they agreed with the coroner to a man. Death from natural causes suited them perfectly. The foreman twisted his neck around for a whispered consultation and gave the verdict with a cheerful grin.

Haskell, the reporter, was grinning too as he hurried from the proceedings toward his waiting car. Before he left Tarryville for Weyburn, however, he dropped into the telegraph office at the station and sent a short message to a big metropolitan daily which occasionally paid him handsomely for items of interest. To his great content, he received a terse command a few hours later to wire the full story. He wondered a bit at this enthusiasm on the part of a hard-boiled city editor, but he did not let his wonder interfere with his vocabulary.

It was not until the papers arrived next day that he learned the reason for the editorial fever. Mr. Perry Johnson, it appeared, was a personage of note in the public eye, and anything appertaining to Mr. Perry Johnson was news—especially if it were an alligator. Haskell's story made the front page, and a staff-photographer arrived to snap the pool.

## CHAPTER VI

### TRAYNOR WAITS

Mr. James Traynor sat at breakfast in his small but pleasant apartment on Columbia Heights. Across the table from him was his aunt, Miss Matilda Landry, a gray-haired, placid-faced, young old lady of comfortable mien and manner. The table was small—in fact, it was one of those useful affairs, a card-table—but the linen that covered it was fine and immaculate, the silver was polished to the last degree of brilliancy, the china and glass were exquisite, and the food—ah, the food! Fruit with never a blemish, toast that miraculously retained its heat, butter fresh from unsalted cows, and coffee whose aroma as it was wafted on high must have made the angels homesick for the departed glories of their terrestrial life. Miss Landry was a good housekeeper.

Traynor, according to his habit, finished his toast and fruit and then settled to work with the morning paper in one hand and his second cup of coffee in the other. It was well understood between them that this gesture with the paper implied no disrespect for his aunt, of whom he was very fond indeed. The news of the day often brought fish to his net, and not infrequently the items gleaned during these few minutes at the breakfast table altered the whole current of his affairs for the day; as for his aunt, she was quite content to sit tranquilly on her side of the table and

listen to his often amusing comments on what he read.

This morning, however, he had barely glanced at the head-lines on the front page when he put down his coffee cup with an emphasis that threatened the saucer. He whistled softly.

"Something?" asked Miss Landry, taking more toast.

"Something indeed!" answered her nephew. "Just a second until I finish this account of an inquest and then you can read it for yourself. Of all the crazy yarns!"

Ten minutes later Miss Landry in her turn had finished the story of the coroner's finding in the matter of the death of Edward Grant, late butler to Mr. Philip Barron of Tarryville. An amazing story, certainly, and one that had lost nothing by the discreet embellishments of a country reporter and a city editor. It was really a very humorous article, but Mr. Traynor was too deeply interested in various other aspects of the affair to do much laughing. On the contrary, when Miss Landry put down the paper she looked across the table and discovered him frowning thoughtfully.

"I was fishing in that very pool the morning of the day this happened," he explained. "Only the afternoon before Philip Barron was telling me the reason why the place is called Alligator Pool."

"Why was it?" asked his aunt. "Tell me, Jimmy."

Jimmy Traynor thereupon ceased to ponder certain matters that were puzzling him and gave her an account of Penobscot Barron's abortive attempt to start an alligator farm. She listened with interest and

amusement, but she did not comment directly on the story when he finished.

"What were you doing in Tarryville, Jimmy?"

"Fishing," said Jimmy, and grinned self-consciously.

"Fishing? Fishing for—what?"

"Well, for trout and—and for information about the Tarryville Farmers Bank."

"So that was why you sneaked off after telling me only that you would be away for a few days on business!" Miss Landry shook her wise old head. "I shall be very angry with you, Jimmy, if you take up bank-robbery on a serious scale. It is too dangerous. Just because you have been lucky a few times is no reason for supposing you can get away with it indefinitely. I do wish you would promise me to stick to the safer business of burglary and house-breaking." A note of wistfulness crept into her gentle voice. "If you only knew how I worry when I know you are interested in some bank! I wake in the night from dreams of you in jail—again!"

"It is the privilege of aunts from time immemorial to worry about their wayward nephews," he retorted lightly. "Believe me, I shall always take every precaution against your dreams coming true!"

For all his air of insouciance, his eyes were somber at the mention of those unforgettable years—three that seemed three hundred—when he had been execrably fed and lodged by the state of New York. What a miserable mischance that had been! A mole on a man's arm, a partner who had turned state's evidence, and he, Jimmy Traynor, the head of a private detective agency and the leader of a clever band of crooks, had gone up the river at the urgent request of his

fellow-citizens. Rotten luck! His face darkened as it always did at the recollection.

"Anyway, aunty, I can reassure you in regard to the Tarryville Bank," he said, coming back to the present with an effort. "Not a tough nut to crack, but the dickens of a place to get away from. It only took me two days to discover that, and then I really stuck to fishing for trout. I had a good time—and I tumbled on an interesting story in connection with these very Barrons. They live there in a rambling house by Alligator Pool, and concealed somewhere in the house is a bunch of ancestral jewelry. No one knows where it is, but they seem certain that it's there."

"Did Mr. Barron tell you that, too?"

"Not he! I don't believe they talk about it, except among themselves. That was how I came to learn about it—by overhearing a conversation between Barron's adopted son and this Miss Morand whose name is just mentioned in the story of the inquest on Grant. I was strolling up the driveway leading to the house, where I was going to ask permission to fish the pool, when I heard voices coming from a small summer-house. I went in that direction, with no more felonious intent than to ask that same permission, and when I was within twenty feet of the place I heard the word 'jewels.' You know how easily I am affected by such sounds, Aunt Matilda; if you don't, just say 'rat' to a fox-terrier and note the reaction. I stopped dead in my tracks and listened."

Miss Landry paid due attention to his account of the brief conversation between Geoffrey and Denise. When he had ended, her bright eyes were even brighter than usual, for, as Jocelyn Keith had justly re-

marked to her uncle, there is something about the thought of buried treasure that might quicken the pulse of a mummy.

"Go on, Jimmy," she said. "I know your wits have been busy ever since you heard about those jewels and I'm perfectly willing to encourage you. Anything but banks!"

"Well, aunty, I haven't thought out anything very good. No use trying to burglarize a house where one has to stop and hunt for a lost lot of jewelry. The best I could do was to leave a professional card, with a mess of trout, at the kitchen door the next morning. I had a sneaking notion that they might engage the services of a detective if the idea was quietly suggested to them. Then, given the entrée to the house and a carte blanche to search where I will, it would be tough luck if I didn't find those jewels before—before anybody else! You see?"

"I do. I gather you have not yet received an invitation to pursue your researches."

"You gather correctly, as always, aunty. But now, with this extraordinary affair of the butler and the alligator——" He broke off and stroked his shaven chin. "Dash it—they *need* me!"

"Do you suspect any connection between this affair and the jewels? I can't see any myself."

"It's certainly not apparent on the face of things, but when you have a mysterious old house, a family that scrap among themselves as these Barrons have done, a lot of hidden jewelry somewhere on the premises, a nephew who admits he is broke and would like to get his hands on the heirlooms—well, I leave it to you! Isn't *anything* liable to happen?"

"Even alligators?" His aunt rubbed from the handle of a spoon a speck that no one else could have seen. "What sort of a person is this artist-man, I wonder."

"I've heard of him often enough, and the other day I even saw him. He was painting by the roadside, in the very spot where he must have been sitting the next day when the butler's death occurred, and I had to pass him on my way from Tarryville to the house. He's a stocky, florid chap, well dressed and outwardly a man-of-the-world. I'd never take him for the sort to have hallucinations."

"You think he really did see an alligator?"

"In Tarryville?" Jimmy laughed. "Do *you* think so, aunty?"

"I can't be sure," said Miss Landry seriously. "I don't know much about alligators. Isn't it a fact, though, that they live to be awfully old, like parrots and elephants and turtles?"

"I believe so, but I can't swear to it. Why?"

"I was thinking of Penobscot Barron's alligator, whose history you have just repeated. The poor animal was finally sold to a circus, wasn't it? Well, suppose it is still alive; suppose it escaped from captivity; do you think it might find its way back to the pool of its infancy? I'm only suggesting it as a possibility."

From the corner of one eye, Jimmy Traynor scrutinized her face carefully—carefully and thoughtfully. His aunt had an impish sense of humor and never looked more innocent than when trying to pull her clever nephew's leg. On this occasion his suspicious regard could find no trace of humor in her placid expression, so he was reluctantly forced to conclude that

even the most sensible women have their moments of idiocy.

"A sort of homing-instinct?" he murmured with a tactful air of considering the idea. "Well—I don't know. It's usually pigeons and cats and bad pennies that turn up again—not alligators. It's a little implausible, too, don't you think? They can't shove along very rapidly on land, and unless this fellow took a Pullman or hopped an empty tank-car——" He dropped his head to one side and a piece of toast buzzed past his ear. "All right, aunty, I'll be good!"

"You're a shameless scamp," said Miss Landry, and added a fervent wish that she was to remember some time later. "If you do go up to Tarryville, I hope that alligator gets you!"

"I only ask for fair play, and may the best reptile win," retorted her nephew.

"You're counting your chickens before they're hatched," observed the lady. "You haven't been sent for yet."

"The wish is father to the thought," he admitted with one of his pleasant grins. "There's an awfully jolly girl up there, aunty, and she's about the prettiest I've ever seen."

"Indeed." His aunt darted a glance at him. "Who is she?"

"Jocelyn Keith is her name. Philip Barron's niece."

"Jimmy Traynor," said his aunt seriously, "perhaps I was unreasonable in warning you against bank-robberies. If you want to rob a bank, my boy, you have my blessing in advance; there *are* things more dangerous!"

"There you go again! You're the champion wind-

mill-tilter of the world. I haven't spoken a hundred words to Miss Keith."

"It only takes three to make trouble," said Miss Landry significantly. "I hope you will never speak them without consulting your old aunty; in some respects you are as innocent as a new-born babe, and any doll-faced idiot like this Keith girl can twist you around her finger."

"She's not a doll-faced idiot——" began Jimmy Traynor with a hint of asperity in his voice, but his sense of humor came to his rescue and he interrupted himself with a cheerful laugh. "Go to it, aunty! I don't see, though, why you take the attitude you do. Don't you want me to reform? Didn't you tell me five minutes ago that you have nightmares of seeing me in jail again? Wouldn't you rather I stuck to the slow but safe profession of private detective?"

"I would," said his aunt, as he paused for breath.

"Then why cast asparagus at every girl whose name I chance to mention? What under the sun could reform me more quickly and permanently than the uplifting influence of a pure and noble woman?"

"Handcuffs," answered Miss Landry tersely.

Evidently the gentle old lady was not in a mood for soft sentiment that morning; with another chuckle, Jimmy abandoned the subject of love and reform. He lighted a cigarette, picked up the morning paper and reread the story of the inquest.

"I'm just itching to take a hand in this game," he said longingly. "There are all sorts of beautiful points that weren't brought out, if we can trust this account. I said a while ago that there was no apparent connection between this affair and the Barron jewels, but all

my instincts tell me that if the family doesn't get busy and engage the services of a smart young detective named Traynor, they are due to lose their heirlooms!"

"So the Barron family may be considered entirely out of luck," commented his aunt dryly, "for if they *should* engage the services of a smart young detective named Traynor they are equally due to lose their heirlooms."

"That," said her nephew musingly, "is as it may be."

With a suggestion of restlessness in his manner, he pushed back his chair, left the table and strolled to the front window of the room. This overlooked the busy harbor, and possibly it was just the in- and out-bound shipping that held his interest for the next fifteen minutes. At all events he said nothing, and the only movement he made during that period was to crush his old cigarette in an ash-tray and light another. His aunt remained seated at the table, equally preoccupied with her thoughts. It was she who finally broke the silence.

"Jimmy!"

"Yes, aunty."

"Suppose some woman—say an innocent, doll-faced idiot—were really to come into your life; would you marry her without telling her the truth about—about your past?"

"You know me well enough to answer that question for yourself," said Jimmy Traynor. "I have my faults, but I'm not the complete hundred-per-cent. mutt."

"For the sake of your own happiness, I sometimes wish you were," said Miss Landry rather morosely. "You may think I'm a silly old woman, Jimmy, but I didn't like the look in your eye when you mentioned this Keith girl."

"Smoked glasses for mine!"

"A very good idea, if you'll only wear them when pretty girls are around. Jimmy—would you do something for me?"

"Almost anything in the world, my dear."

"Then, if you *do* get this Tarryville case offered to you—will you turn it down?"

Jimmy Traynor turned away from the window, came back to his aunt, dropped his hands on her shoulders, stooped and kissed her warmly.

"No, I won't turn it down. It's too interesting. And I'll take my chance on any—complications."

Perforce, she let it go at that.

Traynor went to his office, a fervent hope in his breast that he might find a telegram there from Philip Barron. It did not seem too improbable that there might be one. Barron must be putting two and two together for himself; he must be realizing that there was something afoot that it behooved him to run to earth. He had plenty of money to expend on a private investigation, and it was not likely that he knew any other detective. Under the circumstances, it was reasonable to suppose that he would send a telegram to the man whose professional card had reached him so opportunely a day or two before.

But there was no message at the office. None came during the day, and none came the day after.

When the third morning dawned with no sign of a summons, Miss Landry began to recover something of her customary good spirits, while her nephew took to biting his nails.

## CHAPTER VII

### IN THE KITCHEN

IMMEDIATELY upon learning of his butler's death from his niece, Philip Barron had gone to the man's room to see what information he might glean as to Grant's relatives. He did not have to search at all; on the bureau, evidently received only that morning, lay a letter addressed to Grant, and a glance at it showed Philip that it was from the dead man's brother, apparently a valet in a Chicago club. That was good enough, thought Philip. He dispatched quite a long telegram to break the bad news and to say that he held himself ready to conform with any wishes the Grant family might have in regard to the disposition of the remains.

On the morning following the inquest he received a polite and appreciative note in which the writer confessed his financial inability to meet the situation at the moment. If Mr. Barron would be so kind as to see that Edward was buried decently and inexpensively, the writer would undertake to reimburse him in the future as circumstances permitted. In the meantime he would be glad if some one would pack Edward's effects and send them to him, express collect.

It was an honest letter from an honest, self-respecting man. Philip commissioned the local undertaker to go ahead, and wrote to the Chicago brother that he need not concern himself with the costs until, say, the millennium arrived. The effects, he added, would go forward as soon as they could be packed.

Edward Grant, butler by profession and treasure-hunter by mischance, was laid to rest in a corner of the Tarryville Cemetery. Philip was there, in a black tie bought for the occasion, and Jocelyn, who passed up a bridge tournament to show her respect for the common lot of man. Geoffrey was in New York keeping an engagement that he dared not break with a devotee of the god, Mammon. As for Denise, she pleaded a severe headache and her enforced attendance on a patient whom she declared unusually restless and exacting that afternoon.

Following the ceremony by the graveside, Philip and Jocelyn came swiftly home in the small car. Duties awaited them, especially the girl. She was temporarily cook, chambermaid, waitress and housekeeper, and the position was arduous.

The morning after the inquest, the family had descended to find a cold stove and no breakfast. The day before, their month up, Susan and the cook had been paid for their services to date, and they had seized upon the happy moment to fold their tents and silently steal away. An illiterate scrawl from Hilda seemed to put the blame on an alligator, and it was sufficiently plain that the death of Grant, together with the somewhat harrowing suggestion of a saurian scratching at the back door, had been too much for the excitable pair. Philip laughed and shrugged his shoulders resignedly; Jocelyn shrugged hers, too, and sent an advertisement to several city papers. But her shrug had been one of despair.

"We're out of luck," she said with dark foreboding. "All the wages in the world wouldn't get us servants from Tarryville or Weyburn, and if we get some from

the city, they'll go as soon as the local gossip reaches their ears. I wish Mr. Perry Johnson had been *eaten* by alligators before he had a chance to spread that crazy story!"

"If you're worrying about me," said her uncle with a wicked smile, "you really needn't. While this hot weather lasts, a couple of soft-boiled eggs for breakfast—with toast and coffee, of course—and something cold—anything will do as long as it is well prepared—for lunch and dinner—that is really all I wish. If you can't manage that, Jocelyn, I'll send you back to college for a two-year course in plain cooking—or would they call it rudimentary alimentation?"

"You shan't starve, Uncle Phil," said Jocelyn firmly, "not while there's a delicatessen unravaged in Tarryville and Weyburn; they specialize, I believe, in cold things for cantankerous connoisseurs. How about sliced ham and potato salad for dinner this evening?"

"That leaves potato salad and sliced ham for lunch to-morrow," predicted Geoffrey. "After that, you can slice the potato and salad the ham——"

"Perhaps I can be useful in this emergency," interposed Denise Morand smilingly. "I'm not such a fearfully bad cook when it comes to ordinary things. If you'll let me help in the kitchen, and if Jocelyn will keep an eye on Miss Barron while I'm absent——"

"If you can cook, go to it!" cried Jocelyn. "Leave Aunt Lydia to me for as long as you like." She meditated her accomplishments briefly. "I can set the table, and bring Uncle Phil his third and fourth helpings, and I can make the beds, too. We college girls are not so dumb as the funny papers claim."

Thus it was amicably arranged, and Denise Morand

soon proved herself a tower of strength in a time of need. She wrought wonders with a stubborn stove, achieved miracles with a chafing-dish long since consigned to the attic. After his first two meals, Philip heartily repented having contemplated her dismissal from his house. If Geoffrey were fool enough to marry a woman like that and risk obesity, let him rush on to his ruin!

On the afternoon of the butler's funeral, Denise came again to the rescue. Philip had his promise to the man's brother on his mind and felt that he should lose no time in packing up Grant's belongings. Jocelyn begged off on the plea of some last-minute marketing, so Philip ransacked the trunk-room for Grant's trunk, covered now with the dust of six years, got it clean and carried it to the bedroom that the butler had used. He was just pulling out bureau drawers and wondering if he might suitably use a pitchfork to transfer their contents to the trunk, when Denise entered the room. She habitually moved soundlessly, a trick of the sick-room, no doubt, and he was not aware of her presence until her voice startled him.

"Miss Barron is sound asleep and my headache has gone," she announced. "Can't I do that for you? I've plenty of time before I have to think about getting dinner."

Philip sat down on the edge of the bed and mopped his heated face.

"My dear child," he expostulated, "at the request of Jocelyn, I engaged your services on behalf of my invalid sister. You are not supposed to do general housework or pack trunks for lately deceased domestics. If you have nothing else to do, go and lie down. Other-

wise I shall have to raise your miserable monthly stipend to a sum far beyond my means."

"That won't be necessary at all," said Denise quietly. "You have all been very kind to me—you have treated me as if I were one of the family—and I'd feel a pig if I didn't manage to do something in return. It is time now for your usual stroll to the post-office; won't you go for your mail and leave this to me?"

"You're a brick, Denise," he said gratefully, and rose without further argument. "I only wish you had a few twin sisters to scatter about the house!"

He went to the village, had his customary chat with the old postmaster, notified the express people at the station that there would be a trunk ready for them in the morning and returned peacefully homeward, feeling for the first time in several days that life might once more resume its normal aspect when this unpleasant interlude was finally past. He longed for his books and the quiet of his study, and he didn't care if he never attended another inquest as long as he lived.

He went straight to his desk, seated himself and began to go over a little stack of letters that had accumulated. He was in the middle of this peaceful business when an interruption appeared in the person of Denise Morand.

She held a piece of paper—it was apparently a bit of cheap wrapping paper—in her hand, and she looked rather puzzled as she gave it to Philip.

"This may not be important," she said, "but it sounded so odd that I thought you had better see it."

He read a message that was written on the paper with a blunt lead pencil.

"Search every book in the study."

Philip remained motionless, staring at the note which to him was the bearer of evil tidings. It was a great many years since he had seen a specimen of that handwriting, and it was not so firm now as he remembered it, but there was no mistaking the authorship of the message. The awkward and ill-formed characters had been scrawled by his brother, Sidney Barron.

There flashed across his memory the look of grim and cynical triumph on Sidney's face as he had sat listening to the evidence at the inquest. Philip thought he could now understand that look. Sidney, his own brother for all their quarrel, had connived with a servant to steal the family jewels—if they could find them. *Had* they found them? Slow anger swelled in Philip's breast as it occurred to him that they probably *had*. If Sidney were now possessed of them, that would account for his gratification at the timely removal of an accomplice who could only be an embarrassment while he lived.

He tossed the paper angrily on his desk—and looked up to see Denise Morand watching him with the puzzled expression deepening on her face.

"Yes—it is important," he said slowly. "Excuse me, Denise—sit down, won't you?" He waved his hand toward the note. "You were quite right to bring it to me. Just where did you find it?"

"Underneath a pile of shirts in the bureau drawer," she told him. "That in itself made me curious about it, for Grant was very neat and methodical with all his belongings and this seemed to have been stuck where I found it with the idea of hiding it. The message, when I glanced at it, sounded mysterious, too, so I came straight to you with it."

"Thank you," acknowledged Philip, and began to wish that she would go away and leave him to his disagreeable reflections. "Perhaps it might be a good idea if—if you didn't mention this to any one else just yet. It's—well, it's a sort of family matter, you see."

"I was wondering—could it have anything to do with those hidden jewels, Mr. Barron?"

Philip started visibly and looked at her in surprise.

"Jewels! Who told you about them, Denise?"

"Your son," answered the girl, and looked a bit confused under his searching glance. "He told me about them—I've forgotten just what led up to the subject—only the other day. I would have forgotten the story but—but for something I noticed afterward."

"What was that?"

"The way Grant was acting."

"Ah-ha! So you noticed it too!" Philip Barron reached up and scratched his head, and a rueful look came into his eyes. "You know, Denise, this is something we do not usually discuss outside the family. It has always led to trouble when we have done so. You understand? If you don't, consider poor Grant! On the whole, I'm rather glad that Geoffrey did tell you, for if you aren't exactly one of the family, at least you have shown yourself a good friend—and a level-headed young woman! Since that is so, I don't mind answering your question frankly; yes, I do think that this note has something to do with the jewels. Now tell me, what excited your interest in Grant's actions?"

"Nothing, until your son told me about the jewels and the fact that they are hidden somewhere in this house. Then I remembered odd things about Grant. I saw him once tapping the dining-room wall around the fireplace; another time he was coming down from

the attic—everybody else was out of the house except me—and when I asked him what he had been doing, he told me he had been looking for traces of rats. Then," she hesitated, as if aware of the importance of what she was saying, "then, on the afternoon of his death, scarcely half an hour before it, I was sitting with Miss Barron when I heard a noise in here; I came to see what it was, and I found Grant polishing your desk."

"Polishing it?" Philip nodded. "That was innocent enough."

"Yes, but he looked very much embarrassed when I appeared in the doorway. By that time I had heard about the jewels, and I began to see what he was up to. I went back to Miss Barron, but I kept an eye on the hall by means of a mirror in her room. When he left this study, he hurried down the corridor—and I could almost swear I saw him putting some sort of a paper into his breast pocket as he went."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

She flushed at the implied rebuke.

"It is easy to be wise after the event, isn't it, Mr. Barron? I did have suspicions of Grant but that was all it amounted to, and it wasn't until I found this note that I realized I had been right."

"Ah—this note!" Philip ruffled his hair again and made a grimace at the object in question. "Since you know so much, Denise, I think I will tell you more. That message is in the handwriting of my brother, Sidney Barron, and it is obviously a direction to guide Grant in his search. That means that my own brother has been conniving with my butler in an effort to locate and steal the family jewels."

"Your brother—Sidney!" There had been an air

of grievance about Philip's statement and he was certainly prepared for an expression of sympathy from Miss Morand. It was something of a shock to him when she threw back her head and laughed. "Your *brother!* I'm sorry, Mr. Barron, but it is funny, you know! Are *all* the Barrons mad on the subject of these jewels?"

"All—except myself. I have always been willing to let them rot, wherever they may be. It may strike you as amusing, but I'm really upset to learn that Sidney would stoop to such methods."

"I'm sorry I laughed," repeated the girl, but she spoke almost absent-mindedly. "So—that note was written by your brother!" There was a dry, slightly cynical intonation in her words. "You just looked at it and threw it down, Mr. Barron; will you look at it again—on the *back!*"

Mechanically, he picked it up from the desk, turned it over and glanced at it. Then he caught his breath with a sharp gasp. On the other side of the paper, limned in the same rough fashion with a blunt pencil, was a crude drawing of an alligator. The note fell from his nerveless fingers to the floor, whence it was recovered by Denise Morand.

"What—what does it *mean?*" he stammered.

"I'm sure I don't know what it means," said Denise, "but it does seem to link your brother with the tragedy of Grant's death. That sketch of an alligator can hardly be a mere coincidence."

"But—it's *crazy!* It is worse than a nightmare! Tell me, what does it *mean?* You've a head on your shoulders, Denise, and I seem to have lost mine! What do you make of it?—Answer me!"

The girl's lips parted as though she were about to reply, but an interruption came from the open door of the study. Geoffrey stood there, looking from one to the other. He spoke quietly.

"Hello, father. Hello, Miss Morand." He came into the room, and despite his air of studied unconcern they could see that he was laboring under some degree of excitement. "Will you come down to the kitchen for a minute, father? I've found something I want to show you."

"Of course." Philip Barron jumped up readily. "What is it, Geoffrey?"

"A secret hiding-place near the old chimney."

"A secret——! *What was in it?*"

"Nothing—except this!"

He held out a slip of white paper as he spoke. Philip and Denise leaned forward together to see what it might be, and when his curiosity had been quite satisfied, Philip sat down again even more quickly than he had risen. He drew a long breath.

"An *alligator!*" he muttered. "The drawing of an alligator!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### COUNCIL OF WAR

Philip threw off the shock of Geoffrey's announcement in a moment or two. At first he glanced rather helplessly from the significant paper that he was clutching to the anxious faces of his son and Denise, and it may have been the obvious concern with which they were watching him that helped him to pull himself together abruptly.

"Suppose we go down and see what you have discovered," he suggested to Geoffrey, including Denise in the invitation by a sidewise nod. "I confess I've never known anything so extraordinary and senseless as this business of—of alligators! Are we all mad, or are we living in a dime novel?"

"Dime novel or not," said Denise Morand seriously, "I think you will find that this alligator has swallowed the Barron jewels."

They were on the way down the stairs before Philip retorted that he could trust himself to find an emetic that even a saurian must respond to, and then the threat was only mumbled. It hit him harder than he cared to admit even to himself, this revelation of his brother's complicity with a servant; and that hit him less hard than the reflection that Sidney had succeeded vicariously where he himself had failed in person. Philip, if the truth were known, had searched far more industriously for the hidden treasure than he had

acknowledged to Jocelyn a few days before. He had done his full share of tapping and measuring, and he had pondered many an hour over the old architect's plan of the house in search of a likely corner to explore. He had had his trouble for his pains, and now Sidney, never his equal mentally, had come along and blundered upon the truth. It was all very exasperating!

He found nothing to say when they reached the kitchen and Geoffrey pointed to a small aperture in the side wall.

There had once been an open fireplace built into that wall, in the days when Penobscot had been a boy, but it had long since been bricked up. Modern methods had succeeded medieval ones, and the cooking was no longer done in huge pots suspended over great fires, but on more practicable coal ranges. A relic of the former times was still visible in a rusty iron hinge, securely fastened into the bricks to the right of the sealed chimney; that hinge had once served as a pivot for a stout wooden crane upon which the laundry was stretched and then swung around before the blazing logs.

To the right of this hinge, and slightly above it at about the height of a man's head, one brick was missing. It lay on the floor where Geoffrey had just placed it.

It was too dark to see into the hole left by its extraction, so Philip struck a match with fingers none too steady and held the flame so that it illumined the cavity. A glance showed him that Geoffrey had not been mistaken. The rear of the hole was not empty space or dusty rubble, as might have been expected, but

was a tin-lined receptacle extending at least eight inches back into the area between the inner and outer walls of the house.

Philip thrust his hand into the opening, felt around and brought it out again empty.

"There was nothing there," said Geoffrey quietly, "except that paper I found and gave you."

"Was the brick already out?"

"No, sir, it was in place, but only loosely." The young man seemed to choose his words carefully as though realizing that every detail might be of importance. "I was standing just here"—he moved to the spot he had indicated—"so you see the light from that window fell directly on this wall in such a way that I could note every little crack or fault or discrepancy. The brick caught my eye because it stuck out just a tiny bit beyond the others. I wondered why it should, and I was curious enough to go closer and look at it. I saw that the mortar had been chipped from around its edges, and when I took hold of it and pulled, it came out quite easily. Then I realized what I had tumbled upon, and the first thing I did was to reach in and see what the hole might contain. My fingers closed on that paper, which I took to you at once."

Denise and Philip listened to him in silence, and the girl said nothing when he had finished.

"What do you make of it all, Geoffrey?" asked Philip finally. "Who did it—and how?" Then he started as recollection suddenly came to him. "I think I can answer the first question myself."

"You know *who* did it?" asked the young man incredulously.

"I fear so." Briefly, Philip told the tale of the note

discovered in Grant's bureau. "So the question appears to be simply: How did he do it? How did he know what brick to take out?"

"So you believe it was Uncle Sidney," murmured Geoffrey half under his breath. "In that case, he must either have found some clue to the secret, or else Grant found it and turned it over to him before he died. But how the dickens he got into this house and pried out that brick almost under our noses—I can't tell you!"

"Perhaps I can throw a little light on that," said Denise thoughtfully. "I'm almost positive I locked the back door here last night before going up to bed, but it was open when I came down this morning. I took it for granted I'd been careless and thought no more about it, since nothing appeared to have been disturbed."

"Are you still fairly positive that you locked it last night?" asked Philip.

"Yes, I am."

"What sort of lock is it?" Philip walked across the kitchen, followed by the others, and for the first time in his life inspected the rear defenses of his house. He thought them surprisingly ineffective. "Just an ordinary lock and a straight key. Not even a bolt on the door! A man clever with his hands—Sidney always was as a boy—could turn the key with a pair of small pincers, shove it out, then pick the lock with a skeleton key. It's a wonder we've never been burglarized before!"

"You didn't find the key on the floor this morning, did you, Denise?" demanded Geoffrey.

"N—no, I didn't," said the girl after a moment's

hesitation. "But I don't think that means so very much, do you? If he wished to leave things as much as possible the way he found them, he would naturally think to pick the key up and return it to the lock. He could reasonably count on the person who opened the door in the morning thinking, just as I did, that the door had been carelessly left unlocked."

"Pretty cool customer," commented Geoffrey. "I expect you've figured it right, Miss Hawkshaw!"

"Yes, he's a cool customer," agreed the girl. "There's something else to show that; I noticed it, but maybe you didn't."

They invited her with perfect unanimity to show them; she led the way back to the hole in the wall.

"Look at this floor," she said pointing to the spot at their feet. "Where is the mortar that must have been chipped out from around the brick? There's no sign of it, and if you look close enough you'll see that the floor has been carefully swept."

"What a nerve!" ejaculated Geoffrey. "After all the noise he must have made chipping out the mortar, too!"

"I'm not so sure that he made much noise," said Philip. "If this cache was conceived and completed by my father, as seems likely, it is hardly probable that he put back the brick into a very secure bed of mortar. He would have reflected that he might wish to open it again himself some time and that it would be foolish to make himself any unnecessary trouble. All he needed to do to hide his handiwork was to put a thin shell of mortar down the front part of the cracks."

"Exactly," approved Denise Morand. She stooped and picked up the brick. "You can see that the mark

of the fresher cement is not very deep. She turned her attention to the bricks in the wall that edged the hole. "Also, if the mortar had been solid, he would have had to pry this out, and that would have left marks on the edges of these other bricks. I don't see any, do you?"

Pleased by her prompt confirmation of his own theory, Philip forgave her the fact that Geoffrey had just called her by her Christian name and beamed on her.

"You should have been a detective, my dear," he said cordially. "I told you a while ago that you were a very level-headed young woman, and now I must add that you're a very clever one, too." That compliment paid, he reverted to the subject of the theft and his brow clouded again. "We must assume, I fear, that the jewels are really gone. Now the problem is: Where are they, and how do we get them back?"

"Surely that is for the police to determine," said Denise.

"The police!" echoed Philip, and made a face.

Before he could continue, the back door was thrust open and Jocelyn burst into the room, her arms full of packages that she tossed on the nearest table. The face that Philip had made at the mention of the police was a cherubic smile compared to the grimace with which Jocelyn favored her discarded parcels.

"If ever we get servants again, I'll donate a hundred dollars to the nearest charity!" she cried. "If you could see these silly country markets at this hour of an afternoon!" Her eyes rested on the stove and opened wide. "Denise! Haven't you even *started* dinner yet?" She looked accusingly at Denise Morand,

and then it occurred to her abruptly that neither her uncle nor Geoffrey belonged in the kitchen at that hour, and that furthermore none of the three seemed to sympathize with her troubles in the least. "What is it? What is wrong? Did I hear somebody say 'police' as I came in? Don't tell me that we've had another catastrophe!"

In defiance of her plea they did tell her. They told her together in a sort of wild chorus that was superficially incoherent but from which she managed to glean the more vital truths. She sat down hard on a chair and—if it may be said of a pretty young woman—goggled at them.

"The jewels—*gone!*"

"Clean as a whistle," said her uncle.

"But it's ridiculous! Are you *sure?*"

With somewhat less enthusiasm, they repeated their several joint stories. The jewels were gone. Philip thought the circumstantial evidence pointed indubitably to his brother, Sidney. Denise reiterated her conviction that it was an affair for the police. Geoffrey, confusing the issue with ill-remembered tales of witchcraft, suggested that Edward Grant should be buried again at a cross-road with a stake driven through him; if that were impracticable, a raid in force on the home of Sidney Barron. The jewels *must* be there.

Jocelyn's clear mind, getting into its stride, disposed of Geoffrey first.

"Don't be absurd! The note to Grant, if it can be *proved* to be Uncle Sidney's writing, only shows that he wanted to get the jewels. It doesn't show he really *got* them. There's a tremendous difference between supposition and fact. If we went down there and asked

him if he has them, he would say no; if we thereafter searched his house, either by force or by stealth, he could put us in jail—or make us look ridiculous, which would be even worse!"

"The police——" began Denise.

"Oh—the police!" flashed Jocelyn. "The thief would thank you if he could hear you, Denise! Imagine the local police put in charge of a case like this! What do you think *they* could make of it? You heard that silly coroner making fun of alligators, didn't you?"

"Ah!" Philip Barron whistled softly. "Alligators!" His eyes went down to the slip of paper which he still grasped automatically. "What about this, Jocelyn? What about the alligator drawn on the back of Sidney's note to Grant? Can't you explain the meaning of those things?"

"No, I can't. And if I can't, these idiotic county authorities won't be able to explain either. Don't try them too far, Uncle Phil!"

"Well, if we can't do anything and the police can't, what do you suggest?" There was a distinctly acid flavor about Philip's question. "We are in the market for constructive criticism only, Jocelyn; we can think of the things *not* to do by ourselves."

"Traynor!" snapped Jocelyn.

"Eh?" said Philip.

"Trainer?" repeated Geoffrey blankly. "What sort of trainer? An alligator trainer, perhaps?"

"A very good name for him in this case!" said Jocelyn, and her light laugh rang through the kitchen. "No, you poor people, I mean that nice Traynor—Mr. James Traynor—who was here a few days ago on a fishing trip. The inquiry agent! If we can't do

anything ourselves, and if we don't want to call in the police, a private detective is the very man we need!"

"That is not a bad idea," admitted her uncle. Then he looked at her rather suspiciously. "You thought him nice?"

"Very," said Jocelyn Keith frankly.

"I don't see how he can accomplish anything," said Philip disparagingly. "These private detectives——"

"That's just the way I feel about them," broke in Denise Morand, though Mr. Barron had scarcely had time to express his convictions. "Private detectives are good enough for shadowing people, or watching premises, or guarding wedding presents, or getting evidence against innocent people in divorce cases, but——"

"I'm sure Mr. Traynor never did anything like that!" Jocelyn interrupted. "You hardly saw him the other day, Denise, but I had quite a long talk with him. He's not that sort of person at all!"

"You can't always judge by appearances——" Denise suddenly flushed, checked herself and shrugged her shoulders. "Ah, well—perhaps you are right, Jocelyn."

"I'm inclined to think she is," said Geoffrey. "It looks to me as if Traynor—I'd forgotten his name—was specially sent to us by Providence in this emergency. It can't do any harm to give him a try." He looked inquiringly at Philip. "What do you say, father?"

"I'm inclined to endorse Jocelyn's suggestion," said Philip rather wearily. "Hurt and angry as I am, it rather goes against the grain to start the official machinery going and then oil it by casting suspicion on my brother! If I employ the services of a private

detective we may accomplish something and still keep the truth from the public. Let us call in Traynor by all means."

"Telegraph him," said Jocelyn briskly. "I'm not particularly versed in these affairs, but it seems to me a detective would like to get to work on a case at the earliest possible moment."

"We only have his office address," Geoffrey reminded her, and glanced at his watch as he spoke. "Too late to catch him there. I'll drop in on him in the morning"—he looked at his father—"if that suits you, sir."

"Yes, that will do. I hope we happen to find him free, but if we don't, he can probably recommend some one else."

There was a note of finality in Philip's voice, and though Denise Morand still looked dubious, she forbore to make any further objections. She walked over to the table where Jocelyn had deposited the fruits of her trip to the village and began opening the packages.

Barron went once more to the looted cache in the wall and examined it disconsolately. His niece kept close to his side.

"The tin has warped a bit since it was first put in," he commented. "That was why the brick wouldn't quite fit back into place. If it hadn't been for that, we might never have known that the jewels were gone."

"There's always some little thing like that which interferes with the perfect crime," called Denise across the room. "But it was clever of you to notice it, Mr. Barron. I didn't!"

"Ah, old eyes can sometimes see better than young ones!" he replied cheerfully. "Come along, Jocelyn; if

Denise is to get dinner, you must keep an eye on your Aunt Lydia. It's a mercy that she has slept all this time and not wanted anything."

They left the kitchen. Geoffrey crossed the room to where Denise Morand was busy, and after watching her a moment, he picked up a potato and a knife and began clumsily to peel the vegetable. Denise took both objects away from him.

"You'll cut yourself, child!" She went on with her own work, and it was not until he had swung himself on the edge of the table with every appearance of intending to stay there that she spoke to him again. She did not raise her eyes to his, but her voice was casual. "You must have just got back from the city when you discovered that hole in the wall."

"Yes, I caught the the four-forty."

"And walked from the village. How did you happen to go direct to the kitchen when you came in?"

"Can you ask?" he grinned.

"Yes, I can ask," she responded soberly. "So can other people, Geoffrey."

"Huh?" Surprised at her serious tones, he answered accordingly. "When I came in, I left my bag in the front hall instead of going straight to my room. I knew the hour and—oh, well, Denise, I thought you were in the kitchen getting dinner ready! I came back here at once."

"I wish you hadn't." She looked at him now, and her soft voice was even softer and warmer than usual. "I'd feel terribly if you got into trouble on my account."

*"Trouble!"* he echoed incredulously.

"Detectives — especially private detectives — have

such low, suspicious minds," explained the girl carefully. "You told me the other day that your bank account was gasping for sustenance and that you wished you could get your hands on those jewels yourself. Then you come in here, find the hiding-place and tell your father that it was empty when you discovered it. Suppose this man Traynor starts putting all those things together?"

"My golly! He can't!" Geoffrey regarded her aghast. "Surely you won't repeat those foolish things——"

"No, I certainly won't," said Denise Morand. "But the other day—do you remember?—when we stepped out of the pergola and met Traynor—well, I somehow got the impression that he had been listening to our conversation. You see?"

"My socks and garters!" groaned Geoffrey Barron. "For the first time in my mortal life, I realize what circumstantial evidence can do to a man!"

"Yes," said Denise. "I just thought I'd warn you. Now run along, please, or I'll never be able to finish this soup."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE TRAIL OF THE REPTILE

DENISE MORAND flatly refused to continue the conversation that had startled Geoffrey by its implications. She insisted upon his immediate departure from the kitchen, and she contrived successfully to evade him for the rest of the evening until the hour came when she might reasonably seek the seclusion and privacy of her bedroom.

"There's nothing further to be said," she remarked just prior to his expulsion from her presence. "I felt I should warn you, that's all. It's too bad that it had to be you, of all people, who discovered that hiding-place —and *empty!*" She paused to reflect. "I was rather nasty to Jocelyn about her private detective when she suggested sending for him. As a matter of fact, he really impressed me very favorably while he was talking to us. Perhaps he will turn out to be as human as he looks, and if he is—well, I'll do my best for you if I find his suspicions turning in your direction!"

He thanked her rather gloomily. Somehow, this assurance of her willingness to help him was even more disturbing than her statement of his position. He had heard his father declare his belief in Denise's level-headedness, a belief that he shared in himself, and it shook him to think that she seriously believed him in danger of suspicion.

The possibility of his going to Philip and frankly

telling him of his foolish remarks in the summer-house occurred to him, but it was obvious that to do so would be crossing a bridge before he came to it—a bridge, indeed, to which he might never come. If Traynor had really heard that conversation the results could be very awkward indeed, but it was quite likely that Denise was mistaken in that respect. Geoffrey revisualized the pleasant young fisherman who had accosted them that afternoon and felt comforted. Traynor would probably not hesitate to listen in on a private tête-à-tête when on business bent, but he did not seem the sort of fellow who would make a practise of eavesdropping for the fun of it.

"Silence is golden," said Geoffrey to his fears, and decided to put no ideas into his father's head.

He entered Traynor's office the next morning at ten o'clock, and his good impressions of the young detective were confirmed by the cheery welcome he received. In ten seconds his hand had been wrung, he had been seated in a comfortable chair, his health had been inquired after and a fine assortment of cigars and cigarettes had been offered him. His overnight qualms began to evaporate at once.

"Saw you'd been getting into the papers," said Traynor with a twinkle in his eye. "Have you come to me for help? I've caught lots of things in my life, from measles to murderers, and I dare say I can catch an alligator! Is that what's wanted?"

"That—and the Barron jewels," answered Geoffrey. "They're gone." He watched Traynor's face narrowly. "You've heard of them?"

"Never in my life," declared Jimmy Traynor unblushingly; his face could stand a lot of watching.

"What are they and where have they gone?"

Geoffrey was swept through all his being by a wave of pure relief. It did not seem possible to him that the detective could answer one question and ask another as innocently as that if he had really overheard the talk in the summer-house. Denise had been barking up the wrong tree!

"We're in a bit of a mess," he declared frankly. "Father does not wish to call in the police, for reasons which I will explain, and the alternative is—you! Are you at liberty to take a case just now?"

"I'm never entirely at leisure," said Traynor blandly, "but when something especially interesting turns up I'm willing to side-track other matters in its favor."

"I believe this is interesting."

"So do I. An alligator in Tarryville is as unusual as a frost in Hades, and anything that is unusual is interesting to hardened and blasé detectives." Traynor took out a notebook and a sharp pencil as he spoke. The news that the Barron jewels had gone had really shaken him considerably, but it never took him more than a second or two to adjust himself to altered circumstances. He wanted those jewels for his own enrichment, and at the moment when Geoffrey had entered the office his thoughts were entirely predatory; now it appeared that he must first find them before he could steal them, and the burglar was instantly submerged in the sleuth. He summoned his every faculty to the business in hand and brought an almost painful concentration to bear on the problem. "I want you to tell me every last little detail that you can about this matter. Take your time. I won't interrupt. Don't miss anything."

"Businesslike," said Geoffrey to himself. "He's not all good clothes and good looks."

He told his story carefully and with commendable accuracy. Traynor was as good as his word and made no comment until the end.

"I'll take the case with pleasure," he said when Geoffrey had concluded. "My terms are twenty dollars a day, plus such incidental expenses as may be incurred. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly. In fact my father asked me to tell you that in addition to your regular charge he would give you a reward of twenty-five hundred dollars if you succeed in recovering the jewels."

"It's as good as in my pocket," said Traynor confidently. "I anticipate very little difficulty in finding those jewels."

"Huh?" ejaculated Geoffrey Barron.

"For goodness' sake don't ask me if I have a theory," said Traynor plaintively. "I have, of course—eight or ten of them. Remember, what seems complicated to you is really clear to the trained mind. But I don't discuss probabilities quite as early in the game as this."

"I don't see anything to *start* from!"

"Don't you?" Jimmy Traynor studied for a minute or two the notes he had jotted down in the course of Geoffrey's statement. Then he turned a fresh page in his little book, wrote a single word across the top of it and raised his eyes cheerfully to his visitor's face. "Suppose we start from you! Where were you when that alligator came out of the pool and frightened Grant to death?"

All the confidence he had gained during the past

hour suddenly oozed out of Geoffrey's system, leaving him shaken and panicky. He had watched the motion of Traynor's fingers very carefully as he wrote, and he knew that the word written across the top of the fresh page was no other than his own name. He moistened his lips, which were dry.

"I—I was taking a walk."

"With whom?"

"Alone."

"Oh." Traynor scratched his cheek with the eraser on the end of his pencil. "Grant died about five-thirty —roughly. Have you any idea where you were just at that hour?"

"I must have been in the woods back of the house."

"Not far from the pool, then?"

"N—no, not far! But I've already told you that I came around to the front by way of a path that does not command a view of the pool——"

"Yes." Traynor flipped back a leaf in his notebook and glanced at it. "Yes, you told me that. Thank you, Mr. Barron; you have given me a very clear account of everything to date."

"May I ask—why did you question me about my whereabouts at the time of——?"

"Oh!" Jimmy Traynor gave a care-free laugh. "I can ask questions as fast as a machine-gun can shoot bullets, though not always with the same accuracy! Did I annoy you, perhaps? Sorry if I did. A detective has to draw a lot of covers before he flushes his game, you know, and he often makes himself obnoxious in the process." Nothing could have been more friendly and encouraging than the smile that twitched his lips as he held out his hand. "Good morning, Mr. Barron."

"But—you haven't told me what you propose to do! Are you going right up to Tarryville?"

"No. I shan't go up until late this afternoon. I wish to cover one or two points here in New York, first."

"Here!" Geoffrey gulped. "In New York!"

"Yes. Does that surprise you? Hasn't a fairly obvious lead occurred to you?"

"No. It—it hasn't!"

"Ah—there you see the trained mind getting in its work!" said Jimmy Traynor sympathetically. "I don't doubt I shall have something to report to your father when I see him."

With that, Geoffrey had to be content. He left reluctantly, and for the rest of the day had an uneasy feeling that he was being "shadowed" by some of Traynor's operatives.

As a matter of fact, Traynor had no operatives in the accepted sense of the word. He played a lone hand, relying on his wit and brains to solve the knottiest problem. He had his own methods, and in the past they had brought more than one criminal to book.

Alone in his office, when Geoffrey had left him, he lighted one of his best cigars, leaned back in his chair, placed his feet on his desk and blew smoke rings at an imaginary mark on the ceiling.

"Twenty dollars a day," reflected the trained mind. "Twenty dollars a day, and a chance to play around with the nicest and prettiest girl I've ever met! Not so bad."

He was still in this beatific state of repose fifteen minutes later when light fingers beat a rhythmic tattoo on the glass panel in his door. He called a lazy invita-

tion to enter but did not trouble to assume a more dignified attitude, for he recognized the knock as well as the vague outline of his caller silhouetted against the frosted pane.

A slender, pleasant-faced, beautifully dressed young man came in briskly. He tossed a Panama hat as fine as Traynor's own upon the desk, settled himself in the chair recently vacated by Geoffrey, pulled up his immaculate trousers to protect their crease and stretched forth a shapely hand.

"Gimme, Jimmy," he said.

Traynor understood perfectly what was required, Tommy Hibbert being one of those strange souls whose gift it is never to have any cigarettes of their own. He indicated the supply that he had produced for his last visitor. When Hibbert had taken one and lighted it, he dropped his head sidewise and regarded the detective with a quizzical glance.

"Was it a nice canary, Jimmy? A fat and tender and successful canary?"

"Pardon?"

"Oh, don't pretend to misunderstand me. You have exactly the air of the fabled cat who had just eaten one. Tell me the good news."

Traynor did not hesitate to do so, since this youth had assisted him in the past in more than one delicate matter which had resulted to their mutual profit. If by some chance he should be needed in this new affair, it was better that he should be thoroughly posted on its details before being called upon to lend a hand. He plunged into a brief but comprehensive narrative of the Barron problem, omitting—with great care—only the quite irrelevant fact of Jocelyn's fascination.

"That's the story," he said as he ended. "What do you think of it?"

"Sounds interesting. Where will you start from, Jimmy?"

"Where would you?"

"Well—that alligator. Bit hard to swallow."

"Very hard indeed."

"And that paper the butler was reading—where did it get to? If there really was an alligator, it wouldn't have gone for a piece of paper. It would have gone for the butler. Alligators are very carnivorous animals."

"True, my sapient youth. I can see that you are following closely the pattern set by my own cerebral convolutions. Continue. With practise, you will some day have an intellect as fine as mine."

"I've never doubted it, Jimmy, my love. However—what I wish to point out is that only one man saw the alligator—unless we except the butler, who is no longer in a position to testify—and that same man was the first on the spot from which the paper disappeared."

"Right. But he happens to be a well-known individual whose social standing is high and whose reputation is spotless."

"Every crook has that sort of a reputation until some one comes along and spots it."

"I suppose that's indisputable. On the other hand, Tommy, we might never have known the butler had a piece of paper in his possession when he died if this same gentleman had not stressed the fact. Would he have been foolish enough to mention it at all if he himself had stolen it?"

"Pshaw!" said Hibbert. A certain eagerness that had brightened his expression vanished abruptly. "I didn't think of that objection. I guess I'll leave the detection and deduction stuff to you, Jimmy, and just rally around with manual assistance if and when required. Is it likely to be in this case?"

"I don't know. If it comes to a hand-to-hand struggle with an alligator, I'll be only too happy to let you share in the fracas. Will you be available during the next fortnight if I need you?"

"Sure thing. Wire me, or telephone, and I'll come on the run. Shall I pass the intervening time at the Public Library boning up on the habits of alligators?"

"Better make a study of the habits of artists, especially eccentric ones," smiled Traynor. "I'll give that lad the once-over even if he's as innocent as a babe unborn. Now, on your way like a good chap. I was sunk in the most profound depths of cogitation when you blew in!"

With complete amiability, Tommy Hibbert took another cigarette and his departure. The door had scarcely closed behind him before the detective was once more lost in rapt contemplation of his good fortune, his mind chiefly occupied with visions of the lovely irrelevancy that he had carefully refrained from describing to his friend. Lovely girl—Jocelyn. Lovely name—Jocelyn. Queer how names sometimes just suit the persons they below to. Jocelyn was perfect—for Jocelyn.

It was only by great effort that he forced his thoughts into more practical channels. For more reasons than one, those jewels must be recovered. Stolen, were they? Who stole them? Geoffrey—the lad

with the low bank account? Sidney Barron—the jealous brother? Or—was it the alligator?

Jimmy Traynor grinned at the last theory, because as it occurred to him the memory of his aunt's words came back to him. If he went to Tarryville, she hoped the alligator would get him. She did, did she!

Lazily, he reached for the desk telephone and gave the number of his own apartment. Miss Landry's indignant voice—she belonged to a generation that regarded the telephone as an insult—came to his ear.

"Hello, aunty! Do something for me?"

"Of course, Jimmy." It was wonderful how her tone changed. "What is it you want?"

"I'm going up to Tarryville after all. I'm going to be too busy to come home and pack. Will you fix a suitcase for me and bring it to the four-forty train?"

"Yes. I'll meet you at the gate." The promise was tinged with a gentle melancholy. "Jimmy, you're my only sister's only son; I do wish you'd stay away from that woman."

"Good gracious! This is a perfectly legitimate case! Wait until you hear the particulars."

"I'm not a woman to wait," said Miss Landry, and hung up.

Nevertheless she waited at the station until four-thirty-eight when her nephew dashed up with no moments to spare for diatribes. He took the bag from her, kissed her hurriedly but affectionately and shot toward the closing grille.

"You need some one to look after you, Jimmy Traynor!" came to his ears.

"Perfect nonsense, Aunt Matilda!" he called back.

The next minute he was walking through the train

searching without hope for a vacant window-seat. To his surprise, he found one, and recognized Geoffrey's figure in another seat a bit farther on. The young man, as the detective was to learn later, had altered his habits as the plot began to thicken at Lakeside and now returned to the country every evening instead of only for week-ends.

Traynor might have joined him, but instead, he remained where he was and did not make his presence known until he stepped from the train on to the Tarryville platform right behind Geoffrey. Then he threw out his hand and let it descend heavily upon the young man's shoulder. Jimmy Traynor was gifted with plenty of imagination, and he grinned at the almost convulsive start which Geoffrey gave at that significant touch; certain dark suspicions that he had been entertaining found justification in that involuntary jump.

"It is only I," he said reassuringly, as the young man turned around. "I might have joined you on the train if I had not been too busy thinking about—alligators!"

"Alligators! And what conclusion did you reach?"

"Only one—that there ain't no such animal in this county!" laughed Traynor. "However—— There is Miss Keith, isn't it?"

It was. By a deft maneuver that consisted of shaking hands and stepping forward at the same time, he seated himself in the front of the car beside Jocelyn and left the whole tonneau to Geoffrey.

"I'm so glad you could come," said Jocelyn cordially. "We've been at sixes and sevens these few days—and not a servant in the house!"

"Ah—they got frightened and left." This was nothing new to Traynor, who in his time had made an exhaustive study of domestics. "I suppose under the circumstances that I should offer to stay at the Tarryville Arms—but I shan't."

"We wouldn't dream of letting you! But why *shouldn't* you offer?"

"In this case, I feel it incumbent upon me to stay close to the scene of action. I should feel severely handicapped if I had to live in Tarryville and pursue my inquiry every day after a long walk. Besides, I work best in congenial surroundings, and the scenery at—er—Lakeside is—well, it's incomparable."

"Oh, I never noticed that."

"Perhaps you didn't look in the right place. I noticed it myself almost at once—the other day."

"My uncle will be glad to hear that, Mr. Traynor!" smiled the girl. "I'm afraid he hasn't much confidence in detectives, but if you can begin by showing him something that every one else has missed you'll score heavily at once."

"Uncles are astigmatic in certain directions," commented Traynor. "We must judge them leniently." He raised his voice slightly for the benefit of the passenger behind him. "By the way, Miss Keith, where were you the other afternoon—the day of Grant's death—at five-thirty?"

"I?" repeated the girl. "Why—I was playing tennis at the club! What on earth——?"

"A purely formal question," explained Traynor. "One has to commence somewhere." His ear, turned rearward, caught a distinct sigh of relief. "Detectives, you know, labor under a fearful handicap; we

are simply human beings, but every little thing we say is scrutinized and dissected and—and generally misinterpreted! This is not a very simple business, this affair of the Barron jewels, and I may be here some weeks; in that time I hope you will be able to distinguish between the man and the detective."

"I'm sure I shall!" said Jocelyn Keith, and swung the car between the Lakeside gate-posts with something less than her usual skill. Immediately, she threw on the brakes. "Hello! here's Uncle Phil come to meet you!"

As the car stopped, Traynor leaped out to shake hands with his host. Whatever Philip's views might be on the subject of private detectives, his greeting was urbanely cordial.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Traynor. We have something bigger and better for you to catch than trout! What sort of bait do you use for alligators?"

"A pinch of salt on their tails—or a grain of salt with the tales of them, whichever you prefer!" laughed Traynor.

Philip waved the detective back into his front seat, and joined Geoffrey in the rear for the short distance to the house. He leaned forward as the car shot ahead.

"You don't take much stock in our alligator, Mr. Traynor?"

"You must let me reserve my opinion in that respect. On the face of it, I should say that no such creature existed here since the saurian pet of your father's farm——"

Their arrival at the front door of the house interrupted his further speech. He jumped out again, extended a friendly arm to Philip, took out his bag and

turned to glance up at the house which was to be his home for the next few weeks. An old affair, solidly built, honest in every part, standing four-square to the winds of heaven. Traynor smiled at Philip, who stood beside him.

"Doesn't look much like a nest of alligators! Neither do I agree with our friend, Mr. Perry Johnson, that it has a sinister appearance. I distrust these gentlemen who have presentiments of evil just before the actual event, and I already have something interesting to tell you about Johnson. Meanwhile"—he smiled cheerfully at Jocelyn Keith who joined them—"meanwhile, I am delighted to find myself in a spot so attractive and so peaceful——"

A scream, a woman's scream that told of fearful terror, broke in upon his compliment. For a moment each one of the group stood rooted, frozen with astonishment and alarm. Then they burst into activity and with one accord rushed around to the rear of the house, whence the cry had come.

Geoffrey was the first to reach the prostrate figure of a woman that lay upon the shore at the edge of the pool. It was Denise Morand. He knelt beside her and gathered her into his arms, beseeching her to speak, but it was not until the other three had arrived that she finally opened her eyes and gazed up at them with the bewilderment of a person just recovering consciousness.

"What is it? Oh—I remember!" she shuddered convulsively. "An alligator! I saw it! It came up—just there! Has—has it gone?"

"An alligator!" It was Traynor who repeated the word, in accents that were, to say the least, skeptical.

He lighted a cigarette with perfect nonchalance, as though fainting ladies were a common experience in his life, and the gaze that he turned on Denise Morand was mildly sardonic. "You saw an alligator—here! Had you been dozing, perhaps?"

The girl regarded him with heightened color and flashing eyes. As though anger had revived her, she released herself from Geoffrey's arms and gained her feet in the same lithe movement. For an instant there was blazing scorn in her expression as she confronted the detective, and an angry outburst seemed imminent, but she controlled herself and the color faded from her cheeks. Actually, a touch of amusement replaced the light of battle as it faded from her eyes.

"No, Mr. Traynor, I was not dreaming! I really saw an alligator! No doubt the scream I gave frightened it away." She turned to the others. "I'm sorry to have given you so much trouble, Mr. Barron. Usually my nerves are proof against any shock, but it has been so hot lately, and we've all had so much to do and think about, I suppose I'm not quite up to——"

"My dear Denise," protested Philip. "No one would dream of blaming you if you had thrown a fit instead of just fainting!" He looked troubled and perplexed. "Thank goodness the creature didn't attack you!"

Jimmy Traynor did not stop to listen to this exchange of remarks; as soon as Denise had concluded her brief statement to him, he strolled away from them all and went to the edge of the pool, where the girl had pointed. Yes, the grass was certainly crushed down, as if some heavy body had lain there; he stooped and felt of it, and his hand came back wet.

"This is the darnedest business I ever struck," he

muttered to himself, and since his back was turned to the others he felt free to let his bewilderment show in his expression. "An alligator *might* have made that impression on the grass, and the moisture certainly suggests that whatever did make it came out of the pool."

He carefully circled the spot he had been examining and drew closer to the water. He gave a little exclamation of satisfaction when he saw that a narrow strip of sandy mud lay between the grass and the water, which following upon the dry hot weather was evidently slightly below its normal level. Here, he thought, he might hope to find some definite indication.

Nor was he disappointed. The light was rather bad by the water's edge, so he dropped to his knees and played the beam from a small electric torch on some marks which he had discerned in the sand. He gave an involuntary gasp before turning his head and calling back to the others.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Morand," he said quietly. "Dreams do not leave—footprints, if I may call them that!"

They gathered about him silently, too astonished to speak as they stared at the patch of sand illumined by the torch. In the center of it, clear and distinct, was the imprint of a webbed foot—a print such as a goose might have made, except that this one was as large as a good-sized soup-plate.

## CHAPTER X

### JIMMY VISITS THE SICK

DENISE finally straightened from her inspection of the alligator's trail and regarded the detective half smilingly, half accusingly.

"*Now,* will you believe me?"

"I can't doubt you in the face of this," admitted Traynor, continuing to regard the print in the sand. "Another time, if you tell me that you saw a sea-serpent sloshing around in this pool, I'll believe you. Is that fair enough?" He stood up and brushed his knees; then, his brain beginning to function normally after the first shock of surprise, he put a question to his employer. "Mr. Barron, do you know anything about these animals? For instance: How much would one weigh?"

"It's inexcusable of me not to know," answered Philip dryly, "but it's a long time since I weighed any." There was a snigger from Geoffrey. "How long was the critter, Denise? Did you get a good look at it?"

"I should think it must have measured about eight feet," she replied, then shivered and made a face. "Yes, thank you, I had just as good a look at it as I cared for."

"What was it like?" asked Geoffrey.

"An alligator," said Denise laconically, and Jimmy Traynor laughed outright as the young man grinned shamefacedly at the absurdity of his question.

"Eight feet," repeated the detective, reverting instantly to his own speculations. "That sounds like a pretty hefty animal, if my own limited knowledge of saurians counts for anything. Also, when he left this track, he was coming up the bank—er, he *was* coming up the bank, Miss Morand?"

"Yes," said the girl, "he was coming up just there, and I seem to remember that he slid back into the water just as I screamed and—and fainted."

"My dear, that blood-curdling yell would have frightened an elephant," said Jocelyn, speaking for the first time, with a sidelong smile at Traynor, "let alone a delicate organism like an alligator!"

"What I'm trying to get at," said the detective, "is this: If he weighed a lot, and if most of his weight was resting on this foot as he started to climb up the bank, why is the impression so light? It is distinct enough, but for a heavy animal like an alligator one might expect it to be half as deep again. The sand is soft—see here!" He stepped off the bank with one foot and stood beside the print; when he regained the firmer ground, they saw that the indentation left by his leather shoe was easily as deep as that left by the reptile. "There you are—and I can't possibly weigh one-quarter as much as an eight-foot gator!"

"Does it matter very much what the creature weighs?" asked Philip.

"It does to me," answered Traynor thoughtfully. "If I'm to hunt for a particular alligator in this county, I can't have too much data by which to recognize it when I meet it."

"Fortunately Miss Morand is in a position to identify it for you," said Philip, wondering whether to laugh,

or be irritated. "Parade the first flock you catch before her, and she will pick out the criminal!"

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were right, Mr. Barron," said Denise, but her eyes were on the detective. "I think I can guess what Mr. Traynor has in mind, and if his suspicions——"

"Mr. Traynor probably has dinner in mind," broke in Jocelyn with a laugh, "and his suspicions perhaps relate to our culinary ability! Come on, Denise,—help me allay them!"

Her joking remark, though it brought an appreciative smile from Traynor who had lunched lightly, effectually dispersed the gathering by the pool. She and Denise went off to the kitchen; Philip announced his intention of seeking the study, whither he invited the detective to follow him at his earliest convenience.

"I want a chat with you, naturally. For the present, Geoffrey will show you to your room and generally make you comfortable; when you have freshened up a bit, join me."

"I'll be with you in fifteen minutes."

In spite of this easy assurance Traynor showed no haste to leave the pool. As Philip walked briskly toward the house, and while Geoffrey waited patiently, the detective stooped for another look at the print in the mud. He shook his head as he finally straightened up from the inspection and clicked off his torch.

"Baffled?" asked Geoffrey sympathetically.

"Baffled, me eye," retorted Jimmy Traynor elegantly. "Give me a week and I'll have this overgrown tadpole by the hind leg!"

"Ah—there's nothing like confidence!"

"When it's based on genuine ability," amended

Traynor coolly. He could have sworn that Geoffrey had winced nervously. "Shall we go up to the house?"

They circled it and entered by the front door. On their way up-stairs they were forced to draw aside to give room to a tall, thin, sharp-featured individual who was coming down. Geoffrey greeted him with a nod and a rather curt good evening, to which the other, who was carrying a satchel and appeared to be in a hurry, responded with a polite grunt.

Jimmy glanced about the room to which Geoffrey led him, a pleasant chamber in the front of the house, then requested information.

"Who was that chap we just passed?"

"My aunt's physician. You know about her, don't you?"

"Not a word. She is ill?"

"A mental case. Also paralysis from the waist down. Poor soul, she is bedridden by night and confined to a wheel-chair by day."

"Pretty tough. Your father's sister?"

"Uh-huh. Lydia Barron is her name."

"One would think a sanatorium—eh?"

"Well, she's getting every attention here, and I guess my father rather feels that he is making amends for their old quarrel by giving her a home. She has no money of her own. I don't like Cosgrove personally, but I must admit that she has been showing signs of improvement under his treatment."

"Cosgrove?" Traynor raised his brows. "That's not the name of the doctor who testified at the inquest regarding the state of Grant's health prior to his death?"

"Oh, no, that was Hendricks, a very different sort

of bird. He is the old family-physician type and has run this family for generations."

"But not your aunt."

"Well—you know what mental cases are like. She can't seem to stand Hendricks. His presence, even, in the room is enough to send her into violent hysterics that leave her exhausted for days. The only person she seems to have any affection for is her attendant, Miss Morand."

"Ah—that's who Miss Morand is! I didn't detain you this morning in my office while I asked a lot of questions, and Miss Morand's place in the household was something I still had to learn. How long has she been here?"

"Four months. She—she's a corker!"

"An old friend of the family, perhaps?"

"Not an old friend—but a very good one, now. My cousin, Miss Keith, met her last spring in New York, and they became very chummy. Miss Morand's father was a land speculator somewhere in the Southwest; her mother was French, which accounts for the name, Denise. They had a lot of money, but finally the father died broke. Mrs. Morand was already dead, so Denise was left alone in the world to earn her own living as she could. When Jocelyn met her she was having a pretty thin time doing fashion notes for a woman's magazine, and she jumped at the chance when Jocelyn offered her a real home with work that—well, if it's not attractive, at least it isn't arduous. That's all I can tell you about her."

"Most of which she has told you herself?" suggested Traynor.

"Y-yes." Geoffrey did not altogether like the quiet voice in which the detective asked the casual question.

"I can't imagine, however, that she had any reason for telling us anything but the truth."

"I wasn't questioning her veracity," said Traynor, but his eyes were meditative as he opened his suitcase and began to distribute its contents into the drawers of a bureau. A lady of remarkable charm, this Miss Morand, and worthy of more than a passing glance had her attractions not been eclipsed by the proximity of Jocelyn. Rather odd, he reflected, and rather unjust that a young woman of so much personal distinction should be occupying a position scarcely better than menial beneath a stranger's roof. However, life is full of similar incongruities. "By the way, where was *she* when Grant died?"

"See here, Traynor——" began the other hotly. Then he broke off at the sight of the detective's cool surprised glance and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh—I forgot you were going to ask that about every one! All right. Miss Morand was sitting with my aunt."

"With your aunt—I see." Jimmy's memory went back to the sketchy account of the inquest. "When Johnson hollered for help, a servant appeared at the back door. He called her to get a doctor. She went in again, and a few minutes later Miss Morand joined him beside the dead man—having in the meantime telephoned Hendricks and your cousin, Miss Keith. Is that about right? Good. Then we may suppose that the servant went to your aunt's room and notified Miss Morand of the tragedy, she being the only person of any authority in the house."

"That is exactly what happened. Miss Morand told me so that same evening when we were discussing the affair."

"And what did the servant say?"

"Didn't ask her," snapped Geoffrey Barron.

"And now she's gone; gone into that great unknown sector of society where servants go when they up-an'-leave!" Traynor took his turn at the business of shrugging his shoulders. "Is your aunt at all competent? That is, does she know what has happened, and could she answer me if I were to ask her if she remembers where Miss Morand was when the storm broke?"

Geoffrey thought rapidly. He would not have wagered a cent on his aunt's reliability as a witness, but he did not like the way the detective was sticking to Denise as a possible fruitful subject for investigation. It was just possible that old Lydia *might* come through with a confirmation of the girl's alibi.

"It's worth trying," he answered eagerly. "I know that she has had a great many lucid moments lately. If you like, I'll take you in to see her."

"If you'll show me where her room is," said Traynor firmly, "I won't dream of troubling you further."

"Just as you please," said Geoffrey gloomily.

He went to the door of Traynor's room, glanced down the hall and returned.

"Her door is open, and as the doctor has just left her I'm sure she can't be asleep. Go ahead and try your luck. Second room on the left. I'll wait for you here."

Traynor departed down the hall in the direction indicated. Geoffrey, stretching his promise to a reasonable point of elasticity, stood in the doorway of the detective's room and tried to make his ears do service for his eyes. He heard Traynor tap lightly, saw him enter the sick woman's chamber. Silence followed for

the space of several seconds. Finally, he heard Traynor addressing Lydia Barron in his smoothest and most courteous accents. Strain his hearing as he might, Geoffrey could not catch the words uttered by the detective.

But he caught Miss Barron's reply. Any deaf person within a radius of a hundred yards could have caught it. It fairly boomed through the house.

"Go 'way, you bad man! I don't like you! *Go 'way!*" The last was spoken in the accents of a dynamite cartridge. It was succeeded by a whimpering, more like an animal in pain than a human being. "I want Denny! I want my Denny!"

As though propelled by the verbal explosion, Jimmy Traynor fairly shot out of the room into the hall. An instant later, he rejoined Geoffrey, breathing rather heavily. His face was pale and he was drying the palms of his hands on a handkerchief.

"Phew! That's pretty terrible, Barron!"

"I could have warned you."

"She—she—hang it, she *scared* me! Awful! Not that I'm not sorry for her, of course, you understand that"— Traynor transferred his handkerchief from his hands to his brow, drew a long breath and became approximately himself—"but the hate in her eyes—the sheer *hate!*"

"I've seen it. So has Hendricks."

"She wants her Denny. That's Miss Morand, I suppose. For goodness' sake *get* her her Denny."

"Miss Morand came rushing up an instant ago and is with her now; she was in the kitchen and must have heard the racket. What did you do to the old girl——?"

Then it was evident that some one else had also heard the racket. Philip Barron appeared in the doorway, his face stern, his eyes angry.

"Mr. Traynor! Is it possible that it was *you* who invaded the privacy of my invalid sister? I can not conceive why you should wish to do such a thing, but at least you might have asked permission——"

"That's my fault, father," cut in Geoffrey. "I told him I thought it would be all right."

"It was thoughtless of me, sir," said Traynor. "I apologize for my bad taste in thrusting myself upon an invalid. When I get interested in a case I am prone to act impulsively." This *amende honorable* concluded, Traynor struck a blow on behalf of his *amour propre*. "You will believe me, Mr. Barron, when I tell you that I had my reasons for acting thus."

"Reasons!" echoed Philip discontentedly. "Reasons for asking questions of—of a person in that unfortunate condition! What were they, may I ask?"

Traynor caught Geoffrey's eye and saw its mute appeal.

"Please do not press me for an answer," he said coldly to his host and employer. "You shall have my confidence to the fullest extent that I consider adviseable, but there will be moments when I insist upon keeping my own counsel."

"Humph." Angry as he might be, Philip could hardly deny the cogency of the detective's position. "Well—try to be more careful, won't you, please? Are you coming to my study soon?"

"Right away, sir."

Philip turned on his heel, gave a last indignant snort and left the room.

When he was safely gone, Traynor threw a nod and a smile to Geoffrey.

"Thank you for accepting the responsibility for my break!"

"Oh, that's all right," said the young man, coloring. "For that matter, thank *you* for not mentioning Denise's name to my father!"

Whereupon they shook hands with grave amiability.

## CHAPTER XI

### BENEATH THE BRASS

Traynor, with an ax to grind, thought it best to be circumspect in his encounters with Philip Barron. He had no wish to leave Lakeside. There were three reasons, each sufficient in itself, that held him in thrall; they were: the jewels, the fantastic aspects of the case and Jocelyn Keith. He had these things in mind as he seated himself beside his host before the desk of old Penobscot and apologized once again for his unfortunate invasion of Miss Barron's room.

"It's just as I said, sir; when I get an idea in my mind I follow it up at once, often without thinking of appearances. If you'll excuse my impetuosity this time I can promise you that it won't happen again."

"Perhaps I spoke too sharply," said Philip, somewhat mollified. "Anyway, let us forget the incident. We have only a short while to talk before dinner is ready, and I am anxious to get your opinion of this extraordinary affair. Geoffrey gave you an outline of the facts this morning?"

"An outline, yes. I'm sure his own impression was that he was giving me a full account of everything to the point of being meticulous in the matter of detail." Traynor smiled. "There remain, however, some forty or fifty thousand questions I wish to ask."

"Gracious! Let us see how many I can answer before dinner!" The study was getting too dark for

comfort, and Philip switched on a powerful reading-lamp that stood on the desk. "Now we can see each other, Mr. Traynor! Get on with the first thousand or so."

"To begin with, let me see the note that was found in the butler's room and the scrap of paper that was left in the hiding-place." Philip produced them instantly from a drawer, and Traynor studied and compared the two drawings of alligators. "He is not much of an artist," he remarked disparagingly. "I could make a better sketch of a gator with my left hand."

"So could I, but they weren't intended to be art exhibits. What *was* their purpose? Can you fathom it?"

"I think so. They are simply designed to confuse and perplex." Traynor tapped the two papers lightly with a finger-nail, frowned at them and returned them to his host. "The same hand drew both pictures," he added. "That is fairly obvious from their similarity in composition. You are sure that the note is in your brother's handwriting?"

"Perfectly—unless it's a clever forgery."

"Hardly likely—and I gather from what I've heard that you consider Master Sidney quite capable of conniving with a servant to rob you."

"That is my considered opinion!"

"Where does he live? What sort of a household has he?"

"He lives about half a mile from here. A bachelor establishment—if you can call a miser's home by such a large word. He has one servant, a sort of handy man who works both indoors and out."

"Of what build is your brother?"

"Short—shorter than I am; rather stocky."

"And the handy man? What is he like?"

"He's a fellow Sidney picked up some years ago. I've always thought that he has Indian blood in him. Dark, straight hair, black eyes, tall, very straight and slender."

"Ah!" Traynor looked pleased and made an entry in his notebook. "What is this chap's name?"

"Billy Parker. Do you think——?"

"I'd be foolish even to try to think yet, sir. You say your brother's house is about half a mile from here; does this little brook in back run anywhere near the place?"

"Yes. It runs past the rear of the house, just as it does with us."

"Would that be up-stream from here, or down?"

"Up-stream."

"Good." Traynor nodded. "Now for this alligator business; what sort of an impression did the Perry Johnson person make upon you?"

"Johnson? He seemed a decent sort of man, though I confess I thought him crazy. Premonitions—and alligators! I suppose I owe him an apology now, since Miss Morand confirms his story of a gator in the pool. Why are you interested in him?"

"Because he was the first to see the reptile; also, he was the first on the spot after Grant dropped dead and therefore had the first opportunity to snaffle that paper which Grant was reading. Suppose that contained directions for locating the jewels—eh?"

"Gosh-all-fish-hooks! He might have seen what it was, put it in his pocket and subsequently robbed the house!"

"I called at his apartment in New York this morn-

ing. That is why I didn't catch an earlier train." The detective paused to light a cigarette. "Perry Johnson has been out of town for three days—ever since the newspaper story of the inquest—and his servants either don't know where he is or they won't say. Theoretically, of course, he left the city to avoid publicity and reporters."

"But in reality he may have left to come up here! He could drive off in his car, go wherever he pleased without exciting comment en route!" Philip began to fidget in his chair, his eyes a-gleam. "Why, he could have arrived here after dark the night before last, burglarized the house and be gone again with never a soul to suspect him!"

"Well, I suspected him," murmured Jimmy Traynor, looking to his laurels. "You'll agree with me that he is quite open to suspicion, and I think it will pay us to have his recent movements discreetly investigated."

"Yes—by all means be discreet," said Philip, his enthusiasm dying as doubt crept in. "I gather from the papers that he is a man of considerable standing and reputation. Is it possible that he would stoop to theft?"

"Jewels are jewels," remarked Traynor sententiously. "They appear to have an irresistible fascination for some people which is quite incomprehensible to—er—the rest of us. Perry Johnson might not take a dollar-bill or a single dime belonging to his neighbor, yet he might fall for his scarf-pins or his wife's jewels. That type of thief doesn't have to worry about disposing of his loot, either; half the time a 'collector' like that will lock it up and keep it for his private edification."

"That is what my brother, Sidney, would do," com-

mented Philip absent-mindedly. "I can imagine him gloating over the Barron jewels this very minute—if he has 'em." He spoke as though his thoughts were elsewhere, and as he finished the fraternal compliment he was paying Sidney, he struck the desk beside him a soft blow with his open hand. "Traynor, it isn't possible that Johnson stole them! He couldn't have!"

"Wh-what?" repeated the detective blankly. An uncomfortable chill ran up and down his spine. Had he blundered? "Why couldn't he?"

"The man who took the jewels left that drawing of the alligator in their place, didn't he?"

"Y-yes. We may assume that."

"Very well; yet you say yourself that the drawing was made by the same hand that drew the picture on my brother's note!" Philip was quick to interpret the color that came into Traynor's cheeks. "You see the point—huh? How could Johnson have got hold of that letter, drawn an alligator on it and hidden it in Grant's bureau? How could he—huh?"

"He may have been in league with your brother," began the detective haltingly, "or he might have had some other accomplice——" He ended abruptly, met his host's eye squarely and figuratively threw up his hands. "You're right, sir; the theory of Johnson's guilt is scarcely tenable. Even if he were capable of stealing the jewels, he is assuredly not the type to jeopardize his safety by using an accomplice."

"Lucky we didn't start to pry into the movements of an innocent man, however discreetly," grunted Philip. "Glad I thought of the point in time to stop that!"

There was the faintest emphasis on the personal pronoun, and a suggestion not quite so faint in the tone

of his voice that perhaps Traynor should have thought of the point first. Jimmy did not miss either inflection, and though his face revealed nothing, he was inwardly seething with anger at his crass stupidity.

He had that morning, when Tommy Hibbert had left his office and he had presently gone to call upon Mr. Perry Johnson, really entertained the hypothesis that the artist might have been the thief. The suspect's social position impressed him no more than it did Tommy, since it had been his curious lot to uncover more than one crook among the world's elect and he was now grown cynical. Tommy had balked at swallowing the alligator, and he himself had considered that for a saurian it smelled pretty fishy! Reason enough, he had thought, to look askance at the animal's sole sponsor.

With a fatuous readiness of which even the rankest amateur might have been ashamed, he had accepted Johnson's fortuitous absence from the city as supporting his theory. It seemed very plausible to suppose that the artist had chanced upon the scene just at the right moment to pick the fruit resulting from the efforts of Sidney Barron and the butler. Sidney had directed Grant in his search and directed him successfully, and then Johnson had calmly stepped in and appropriated the find. Stranger things had happened in his own experience.

Yet all the time he was nursing the hypothesis of the artist's guilt, he had known of the two sketches of an alligator. Why hadn't he seen at once the absurdity of supposing that Johnson could have drawn them both? He had had the most of the day to detect that glaring impossibility; why hadn't he?

He knew the answer. Instead of thinking about the

case he had accepted, he had thought about—Jocelyn Keith! That's what came of mixing love and—and business! He groaned inwardly, paying deeply for his day-dreams in this moment of bitter humiliation.

"What about my brother, Sidney?" asked Philip, breaking in upon his mournful reflections. "I think we're back to him now."

"I think we are." Traynor pulled himself together with an effort. "He sent that note to Grant and consequently we know for a positive fact that he was after the jewels. Come to think of it," he added ruefully, "that is the only real honest-to-goodness *fact* about the whole case—that and the alligator."

"The alligator!" snorted his employer. "You consider that a fact, do you? It's my idea of a glaring fiction!"

"Johnson saw it. So did Miss Morand."

"He imagined it—association of ideas with the name of the pool—a floating log in the water—that was enough. As for Denise, she dreamed it."

"Did she dream that print into the mud?" asked Traynor. "If she did, we ought to notify the Psychical Research people."

"Yes, that's queer," admitted Philip reluctantly, "but not so queer as the idea of an alligator being in that pool, or anywhere else in the stream. Even if the very thought weren't absurd, remember that the sheriff and a couple of detectives searched both banks for a long way in each direction and found nothing resembling an alligator."

"They didn't look in the right place," said Traynor wearily. "I shouldn't have wasted my time looking at the banks."

"Oh. Where would *you* have looked?"

"Up the trees."

For a moment Philip doubted his ears—and then began to doubt his wisdom in ever having sent for this young man. He stared hard at Jimmy, and came to the unkind conclusion that the detective resembled nothing so much as a tailor's dummy; he was good-looking and beautifully dressed but mentally a total loss. First he had frightened Lydia in an effort to question an invalid whom he knew to be incompetent, then he had suggested a preposterous hypothesis fixing the guilt on a reputable man who was palpably innocent, if an ass, and now he was talking the most arrant——!

"Do you find alligators up trees, Mr. Traynor?"

"Not usually, sir, but this is a very peculiar and particular bird."

"I've a light fowling-piece that you can have in the morning if you care to try your hand at bagging it!"

Traynor did not reply. He was quite able to read Philip's thoughts, and reading them, to dismiss them with a shrug. He had made a bad beginning, thanks to his own stupidity, and he had given the other plenty of reason to consider him an imbecile. But the beginning is not the end, he reminded himself, and a good ending to this case would amply compensate for initial errors. Unconsciously, he set his firm narrow jaw. He would find those jewels if it took him the rest of his life! Once found, he would do one of two things, each perfectly satisfactory to himself. Either he would profess to have failed in his quest, in which event he might walk off with the loot unscathed and unsuspected, or else he would——

He stopped that line of thought right there; if persisted in it would lead to his thinking about Jocelyn Keith, and for the moment he felt that he had done enough of that already.

"Yes, sir, I repeat we have too many assumptions and too few facts upon which to base theories. You've just taught me a useful lesson to illustrate the futility of jumping to conclusions." Jimmy paid the compliment—it was really quite an honest one—in the hope of placating his employer. "For instance, we know from Johnson that the butler was reading something just before his death, something which immediately disappeared. This is suspicious, if you like, but how do we know it had anything to do with the jewels, after all? I've heard your son's views on the point, but I'd rather hear yours."

"I'll give you my views with pleasure, Traynor." The compliment had gone home, inducing a pleasant warmth in Philip's breast and a willingness to give the young man a sporting chance to recover the ground he had lost. "Check me if I seem to go wrong anywhere."

"In the first place," he continued, "the jewels are gone. I have never seen them and most of my knowledge of them is based on hearsay, but they really did—or do—exist, and they really were concealed somewhere about this house.

"I had already reason to suspect Grant of conducting an illicit search for them. I had found him prowling about the house once or twice and had discovered him going through these books—in obedience, as we now know, to Sidney's suggestion. In addition to that, my niece and I have both heard sounds in the night which we were puzzled to account for; sounds such as

a man might make if he were walking stealthily over boarded floors. We ascribed it to the creaking of old timbers, but it is manifest now that Grant did not confine his activities to the daytime.

"On the afternoon of his death, and only shortly prior to it, Miss Morand was sitting with her patient when she heard a noise in here and came to see what it might be. She found Grant apparently cleaning this desk, but he betrayed evidences of perturbation when she addressed him. I've her word for that, and I consider her a most reliable and intelligent witness.

"A few minutes later she saw him hurrying from the room, at the same time thrusting some sort of paper into his pocket. He went to the little clearing beside the pool, a favorite spot of his when resting from his work, and you know what happened there.

"Subsequently, while packing his belongings, Miss Morand unearthed that note from Sidney; she brought it to me at once, and she was actually sitting here and talking with me about it when Geoffrey burst in to say that he had found a secret hiding-place in the kitchen and that it was empty.

"No one takes the trouble to seal up an empty hiding-place, so it was reasonable to suppose that something had been taken from it by the thief. It is unlikely that anything else was hidden so carefully in the old house, and I believe firmly that the thief got the jewels—which is borne out by the drawing of the alligator that links it with the note from Sidney.

"The burglary took place very shortly after Grant's death—no doubt the thief had to wait his opportunity—and also shortly after the butler had been seen hurrying from this room with a paper in his possession.

We have always understood, from certain words uttered by my father at the time of his death, that this study held some clue to the secret—and now I believe that Grant happened upon it, that it was taken from him in death and that it led the thief to the hiding-place. Doesn't it all hang together, Traynor?"

"Yes, sir, it does. Short of being absolute proof it is perfectly convincing." Traynor glanced about him curiously, but the powerful reading-lamp sent its rays downward and left most of the room to the shadows. "The clue may have been concealed in this study, you say. I suppose it has been thoroughly searched?"

"Inch by inch. Several times." For the second time Philip struck the desk that stood before them. "Especially this old beauty; it belonged originally to my grandfather and it seemed possible that there might be a concealed compartment in it somewhere. But there isn't. It has been tapped and measured and all but taken to pieces."

Jimmy Traynor scrutinized the piece of furniture with his keen gray eyes, more from curiosity than from any hope of discovering something where many before him had failed. He liked old furniture, too, and this was a superb specimen of its kind. Age, and over a century of care with oil and polish, had left its flat top with a surface that shone like black ice in the light of the lamp.

Toward the back of the desk, set flush into the wood, was a rectangular brass plate with three depressions which held securely two ink-wells and an old-fashioned stamp-box, all of the same metal. These and their sustaining plate were highly polished, and since they made a brilliant splash of light against the dark wood it was only natural that Traynor's glance was at-

tracted to them. Perhaps it was less natural that once attracted his glance should linger upon such unpromising material, but a man who habitually uses his eyes to the very limit of their powers of observation soon develops a sort of sixth sense that warns him when there is anything wrong or out-of-the-ordinary about the object he has been regarding.

So it was now with Jimmy Traynor. Instinct told him that he was observing something with his eye that his mind still refused to see, and it was some seconds before he could definitely identify the disturbing element. When he did, a thrill ran through his entire body as if he had just gulped down a tumblerful of white-mule whisky. It took all his self-control to check the excited little laugh which came to his lips, for he felt sure that he had come again—most luckily and unexpectedly—upon the trail of the thief.

"Grant did his work well," he observed quietly, not loath to practise a bit of grand-stand play after the debacle of a few minutes previous. "I presume it was he who polished the brass ink-stand there?"

"Eh?" Philip roused from a revery. "Yes, he was a good servant—apart from his passion for jewelry!"

"You will find lots of butlers who will polish the heads of brass screws," continued Traynor placidly, "but you won't often find one so conscientious that he'll clean the polish out of the grooves when he has finished."

It was an instant before Philip Barron grasped his meaning. Then he came to his feet like a marionette jerked by a wire.

"Screws! There are no screws there!"

"Oh, yes, there are!" said the detective, and enjoyed a second thrill; Barron's excitement could only

mean that his hopes were about to be confirmed. "Do you mean to say you've never taken up that plate?"

Philip answered by action, not speech. He dashed around the desk, fumbled in a small tool-chest that he kept in a window-seat and returned at a sharp trot, bearing a screw-driver. In the meantime Jimmy had risen and was playing his delicate fingers over the surface of the brass plate.

"You never noticed these screws," he explained, "because until a few days ago they were covered by caps, flush with the plate and so beautifully fashioned and fitted that they were practically invisible. Whoever removed them was either too hurried to restore them or else didn't think it worth the trouble."

"How do you know that?" snapped Philip, busy with his tool.

"Obvious. You'd have seen them if they'd been in sight."

"I always supposed the blessed thing was cemented!" Philip grunted mournfully as he added, "They come out easily."

"Not as if they'd been undisturbed for thirty years!" said Traynor smiling. "There has been some one before us, all right. Here—hold on, sir!"

Philip had picked out the last screw. The detective pushed him gently away and very gingerly raised the brass plate and laid it aside.

Its removal revealed a shallow space that had been carefully chiseled out of the wood beneath. A slip of paper, blank on its uppermost surface, was lying in the recess. Traynor took it out and turned it over, and once more they gazed upon a sight that was rapidly becoming familiar—the rough sketch of an alligator.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE USUAL FINGER-PRINTS

PHILIP BARRON swore crisply. The detective, more used to surprises and less prone to reveal his emotions, lighted a cigarette and stood thoughtfully staring at the sketch. It seemed to stare back at him, and on this occasion the draughtsman, whoever he might be, had imparted a sneering expression to the alligator's upper lip that Jimmy did not care for at all. Presently, he signified his disapproval by reaching out and turning the sketch face down.

"I think we might call this adding insult to injury," said Philip sourly.

"My own idea exactly." Traynor dismissed the matter from his thoughts for the moment and returned to a close scrutiny of the shallow hiding-place he had found. A tiny fragment of some dark substance lay on the bottom, and he picked it out and held it beneath the lamp. He nodded his satisfaction before explaining it to his companion. "A bit of sealing-wax—dark-red sealing-wax. That settles it, sir; there has been a sealed document in this very private filing cabinet, and I can't think of anything more likely to be sealed than a paper containing a clue to a treasure, can you?"

"What difference does it make?" demanded Philip sadly. "The damage has been done."

"It remains for us to undo it, then, and you never

know when some little detail will help. I'm still bent on proving that Grant really got his hands on the paper. Do you suppose you could find me anything—a piece of metal, preferably—that the butler handled before his death and that hasn't been touched since?"

"There's a silver cigarette-box there on the mantel," said Barron. "He cleaned that the day before he died and put it there himself. I'm confident no one has touched it since. Will that do?"

"Excellently."

"The usual finger-print stuff, I suppose."

"You don't take much stock in it, sir?"

"I won't commit myself at this time, Traynor. What are you proposing to do?"

"I'm going to take the box and the brass plate to my room and test them for finger-prints with some special powder I have. If any turn up on the silver we can be sure they're Grant's, and if we find the same prints on the brass we'll know that it was he who was here before us."

"It's as plain as the nose on your face that he was!"

"I quite agree with you, sir, but I'm beginning to develop a perfect passion for proof as far as this case is concerned." Traynor went to the mantel, slid the silver box on the palm of his hand and came back for the brass plate, which he took up as carefully. "Will you come along and watch or will you wait here? I shan't be five minutes."

"I'll wait."

Traynor left the room. Philip Barron settled back in his chair and drummed nervously and a little impatiently on the desk with his long slender fingers. He was far from satisfied with this young man. In his opin-

ion, Traynor was wasting a lot of time, and if the Johnson fiasco were a sample of his ability it did not seem likely that he would add this case to his list of successes. Neither did Philip approve of the sudden interest that Jocelyn had shown in the kitchen when it occurred to her that Traynor must be hungry. When a woman starts to feed a man, he reflected cynically, it leads to one of two things: indigestion or matrimony. He devoutly hoped that Traynor's portion might be a colic. As for this business of the finger-prints . . .

A sudden inspiration broke the current of his thoughts, and a grim smile curved his lips. If he didn't miss his guess, he was going to score heavily off the detective once again. With a sense of pleased expectancy, he straightened in his chair, took the hand that had been drumming on the desk, placed it in the other and began slowly but contentedly to rub them together. Finger-prints—hah!

It was with some difficulty that he concealed his cheerfulness as Traynor returned. Jimmy was cheerful, too, but was not making any particular effort to hide the fact.

"Got 'em all right!" he announced.

He put down the silver box and the brass plate and pointed to a number of smudges on each. He produced a magnifying-glass—Philip gave one of his most emphatic snorts—and invited the other to see for himself.

"Yes," admitted that gentleman, when he had obligingly peered at the smudges. "Yes, there is no need to call in an expert for these. He had those long, spatulate fingers, they're unmistakable, and the prints

on the brass are certainly the same as those on the silver. That, I presume, is what you call proof in your profession?"

"Yes, sir. I'm well satisfied with this evening's work."

"But—er——" Philip prepared to launch his torpedo, that was to sink this battleship of complacency. "Aren't you overlooking something, Mr. Traynor?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"What do these finger-prints prove, after all? They were made by Grant, no doubt, but where would you expect to find his finger-prints if not on a brass plate that he was in the habit of polishing? Really, my dear Traynor, I don't see how their presence indubitably indicates that he found the hiding-place!"

His dear Traynor looked blank for an instant, and then a smile of ineffable sweetness brightened his pleasant face. The torpedo had exploded, but there was nothing sunk.

"Do you suppose," he asked gently, "that he could have polished this plate so hard that his finger-prints came through on the under side?"

"The *under* side!" cried Philip distractedly. "The *under* side!" He stared at the brass as though it had hypnotic qualities, then leaned back in his chair and swore for the second time in twenty minutes. Thereafter, rather to Jimmy's relief, he threw back his head and laughed. It was, moreover, a laugh that rang true. "I'm not too old to appreciate a joke on myself, Traynor!" he said. "I thought I had you, and you've hoisted me very neatly with my own petard."

There was a step in the hall outside the study door. In a flash, Traynor had risen from his chair, seated

himself on the edge of the desk so that he faced the door and spread the bottom of his coat as far as it would go on each side of him. The next instant Geoffrey appeared in the doorway, where he came to a stand with his hands held stiffly by his sides while he achieved an excellent imitation of a butler's dignified bow.

"I am requested to inform you, sir, that dinner is served in the dining-room."

"You surprise me," said Philip. "Can't we have it on the roof, as usual? And is it only *dinner?* From the time it has taken them to prepare it, we were expecting a banquet at least!"

They all laughed; Traynor caught Geoffrey's eye.

"Will you go and tell the household authorities that we will be down in about two minutes? There is just one more thing I want to discuss with your father."

"Sure," said Geoffrey, and unable to ignore such a broad hint, he departed forthwith. "Don't be any longer than that," he called back, "unless you're hunting for trouble with the commissariat."

"What's the idea?" asked Philip swiftly.

"This," said Jimmy. With deft sure fingers he began to replace the brass inkstand and screw it into its accustomed niche. "There is one matter that I wish to impress upon you, Mr. Barron, and I'm sure I can count on your hearty cooperation. I'll discuss with you everything I do and keep you posted on all that I learn, but you must not betray my confidence to any living soul. What we know we will keep to ourselves. It is a sensible precaution, sir, and I hope you won't think it unreasonable."

"You're quite right, though I confess I shouldn't have hesitated to discuss developments with my own household." He stopped a moment, and added rather nervously, "I hope that your restriction doesn't mean that you—you suspect—any member of our own circle."

"Put any such thought as far out of your mind as you like," said Traynor reassuringly. He stepped back and regarded his completed task with a critical eye. "There. I think I've left things as we found them—except this." He picked up the latest sketch of the ubiquitous alligator and put it carefully between the leaves of his notebook. "Now, sir, if there's a roast ox or two down-stairs, lead me to them!"

"Perhaps he'll do, after all," said Philip to himself as he ushered his guest to the feast. He gave a soundless chuckle. "The under side! Yes—that was neat and served me right."

"He asked for it," ran Jimmy Traynor's thoughts at about the same moment. "Tried to trip me—and broke his leg. He's not the first. And I'll bet that he hasn't noticed what *I* noticed; he was too busy making game of *me!*"

He rather dreaded the dinner-table, fearing that he might be bombarded with a series of questions that he would either have to evade, ignore, or answer with polite lies. The detective in him was for the time being uppermost; whatever he might decide to do with the jewels when he got them, the main problem, now, lay in the getting. He must watch his step, hold his cards close to his chest, keep his eye peeled—and confide in no one.

He soon discovered that he had done scant justice to

the tact of the Barron household. When he had laughed aside one or two queries from Jocelyn and Geoffrey, they realized that curiosity was out of order and refrained from pressing him. It was Jocelyn, indeed, who finally came to his rescue by asking him to relate some of his experiences as a detective.

"Yes, I've had some interesting cases," he admitted cheerfully. "For instance, a recent one . . ."

He plunged into a light and amusing account of the theft of a valuable jeweled cross from a convent in Italy. It had been brought to America by the thief, who in the guise of a nun had succeeded in hoodwinking a millionaire collector. Traynor had been called in when the collector's suspicions had been aroused, and it was he who had penetrated the nun's disguise and revealed "her" to be a young man who was apparently the last word in female impersonators. Thereafter he had taken the cross back to Italy and delivered it to a grateful Mother Superior and collected a handsome reward. He told the story well, with flashes of humor that kept his audience laughing, and to his great satisfaction the end of the anecdote coincided with the end of the dinner.

"And what became of the young man who pretended to be a nun?" asked Denise Morand, as they rose from the table.

"Oh—he escaped! As far as I know he is still at large. I can't pretend to be sorry—it would be a crime to lock up an artist of such talent."

"You sympathize occasionally, then, with some of the victims you catch," she continued, smiling.

"With some of them, yes."

"Misplaced sympathy, in my opinion," said Geof-

frey rather abruptly. "This country is shot to pieces with crime of all kinds, and I am blessed if I can see how any decent citizen can condone even a theft."

"But you're young yet," said Traynor indulgently, "and besides, I don't suppose you've ever been tempted to commit a theft—have you?"

"Certainly not!" was the swift retort, but Geoffrey caught Denise's sardonic eye fixed upon him and flushed darkly.

"Not everybody is so fortunate," said Jimmy Traynor, who had missed neither the girl's glance nor the man's embarrassment. "However, don't let's spoil a lovely evening by discussing sociology."

"I should hope not," concurred Philip Barron, returning from a trip to the sideboard armed with a decanter and tall glasses. "Geoffrey, Mr. Traynor has probably forgotten more about theft than you ever knew!" He smiled at the detective and waved the decanter engagingly. "Traynor, I think I owe you this!"

"It's a debt we'll have to let run," said the detective. "I'm no teetotaler in my hours of ease, but I never mix thinking with drinking. In fact, if you'll excuse me I believe I'll slip up-stairs to my room. I've had rather a long day."

To a chorus of general regret—some of it rather sotto voce from Geoffrey—he insisted on retiring. They gave way when he explained that he wished for quiet in order to think over the complicated aspects of this present case.

"It's a tough one," he apologized with a smile. "It has as many curious twists as—well, as an alligator has scales!"

On his way up-stairs he was preceded by Denise,

and he seized the opportunity to clear up one point that had been puzzling him. She was about to enter her patient's room when his light touch on her arm checked her.

"May I have a word with you, Miss Morand?"

"Of course."

"Wait for me, then, in Mr. Barron's study. Turn on the lamp there. I'm going to my room, but I'll be with you in a second."

She nodded, and obeyed him with flattering promptness. He walked rather heavily to his room, opened the door and shut it again. Then he stole noiselessly back —and Jimmy Traynor could walk as soundlessly as a cat on concrete—until he could look into the lighted study. Denise was seated in one of the chairs by the desk, and as he watched her she took a magazine that was lying there and began idly to glance through it. With a philosophical grin and a sigh for a trap that had failed to spring, he crept back to his room, slammed the door again and came down the hall like a tornado.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he apologized. "It isn't anything very important that I have to ask you, either."

"I suppose detectives always preface their most vital questions just that way, don't they?" she smiled. "I can't imagine what you want to ask me, but I'll try to answer as clearly as I can."

"It's about your patient. You're the only attendant?"

"Yes. I have spoken to Doctor Cosgrove about the advisability of a relief, but he doesn't seem to think it necessary."

"You must leave her alone a great deal. I've noticed that in the short while I've been here. Is it wise?"

"Hers is rather a curious case, Mr. Traynor. She

sleeps most of the day as well as the night. She requires very little attention, and while I may not be actually in the room I generally contrive to keep within earshot. She has only to call if she wants anything."

"You'd be within earshot if you were in the next county," observed Jimmy Traynor with some feeling. Denise looked surprised, and then laughed as his adventure of the afternoon recurred to her. He smiled. "When she was born a woman, a good fog-horn was lost to the world! However, what I'm most interested in for the present is her mental state. Is she at all competent?"

"I think that would depend on what you wanted. Recently she has shown just a faint tendency toward the normal. The doctor is encouraged and seems to think that she may recover her full mental powers."

"Can she understand questions—and answer them?"

"Most decidedly not. Don't try it, Mr. Traynor."

"I'll be guided by your opinion until I get it confirmed by her doctor—Cosgrove is the name, isn't it? Next time he comes tell him I want a chat with him. What do you think of him, Miss Morand?"

Denise hesitated, not unnaturally, but he gave her a nod as much as to say that she could speak confidentially, and then she answered frankly.

"I don't like his personality. He may be a good enough doctor—Miss Barron is decidedly improving under his care—but at times his manner is so queer that I've wondered if he might be a drug addict."

"Lots of these country doctors are—poor devils."

The girl smiled.

"You appear to have a compassionate nature, Mr. Traynor," she said, and her voice was even warmer

and softer than usual. "Do you ever judge any one harshly?"

"Yes, if I know all the facts in the case and am convinced that there are no mitigating circumstances." He rose and held out his hand. "Good night, Miss Morand, and thanks."

He did not do so much thinking as he had expected after he had undressed and got into his comfortable bed. To his surprise—it was not yet ten o'clock—he felt sleepy and tired. For a while he made a valiant effort to concentrate on the various scraps of information he had gleaned that afternoon, and some of them were decidedly interesting, but they persisted in mixing themselves up with visions of Jocelyn Keith and an alligator. These grew confused in their turn, and when he finally could not distinguish the lady from the saurian he gave up the struggle and went to sleep.

At breakfast the next morning he was silent and preoccupied, and after eating with an indifferent appetite, excused himself on the plea of an important letter that he must write.

"You'd like it to go this morning?" asked Jocelyn. "I'm going to the village in the car to do some marketing and I'll be glad to run you in to the post-office."

"There's nothing could please me better," he said with a quick smile. "You're very thoughtful, Miss Keith."

He made haste with the letter, which was written to a detective agency in New York. He gave them clear and precise instructions in regard to what he wished them to do, and knew that they would be faithfully carried out. Then he hurried to join Jocelyn, who was already waiting for him at the front door.

She drove him to the post-office and left him there while she made a few purchases at the grocer's and butcher's, then picked him up again. Before she started the car she glanced at him inquisitively.

"There's no hurry about these provisions," she remarked. "Would you care to take a little drive and see something of the country—or are you too busy detecting this morning?"

Jimmy's conscience, never a formidable factor, struggled with temptation and lost in the first minute of the battle. He had really intended to go looking for alligators in trees, just as he had told Philip, but the prospect of a drive with Jocelyn was infinitely more alluring. He made one feeble effort to square himself with duty. "I might combine business with pleasure," he said. "Could we pass your Uncle Sidney's house? I'd like to take a look at it."

"Oh, but that's just on this dusty old highway," protested his companion. She waved a hand northward. "I want to take you up in those hills and show you some real scenery."

Mr. Traynor contemplated telling her that if they continued to sit right there, side by side, in Tarryville, he would be satisfied with the scenery, but checked himself with an admonition not to be too abrupt.

"All right," he said. "I'd much rather take a drive with—er—with somebody who knows the country as you do than poke around trying to find clues to a mystery. I'll put off till this afternoon what I should do this morning. Perhaps you'll help me, too."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hunt alligators. It's great fun."

"Ugh! It sounds dangerous!"

"I'll be with you," said Mr. Traynor tenderly. "No saurian shall touch you!"

They called it a bargain and drove off, perfectly content with themselves, the weather and life in general. They returned at noon, and reached the house in such high spirits that they barely noticed the frosty greeting they received from an elderly gentleman who had been pacing up and down his front piazza, figuratively kicking himself at every step. He scowled after them as they disappeared into the front hall. Here a more cheerful greeting awaited them. Denise Morand, from the head of the stairs, called an item of good news.

"Jocelyn! We've got a cook!"

"Oh, lovely! Where did you get her? Is she going to stay?"

"I think so. She came in answer to your advertisement. I showed her references to Mr. Barron, and he said to grab her. She's old enough to be sensible, and it would have done you good to see the way she tackled the breakfast dishes!"

"Glory, what a relief!" said Jocelyn.

She turned with a smile for Traynor as she started up-stairs, then paused as she noticed his serious face.

"There's been a lot of publicity around this place since the death of Grant," he remarked. "You can't tell who might turn up, or what their motive might be. If you don't mind, I'll step back to the kitchen and take a look at this highly opportune arrival."

Hardly waiting for her prompt consent, he strolled toward the rear of the house and entered the kitchen. Then he shut the door quickly behind him, clapped his hand melodramatically to his brow and gazed at the new cook, whose eyes twinkled at his astonishment.

"Aunt Matilda! What in the mischief——?"

"Mrs. Tillie Brown, if you please, sir. As for mischief, I've come to see that you don't get into any!"

"Of all the nerve! What's the idea?"

"I saw that they were advertising for a cook—and I'm not so bad, if I do say it myself! It struck me that you might be glad of some one in the house to keep an eye and ear open, and nobody will guess that I'm one of your—operatives, do you call 'em?"

"That's right." Jimmy Traynor shrewdly suspected that Miss Matilda Landry had come to see what Jocelyn Keith might be like, and he was divided between amusement and annoyance. Then, as he caught an appealing look in her eye, he strode over to her and embraced her warmly. "Aunty, you're a brick!"

"I *may* be able to help you, Jimmy!"

"Why not? I'm likely to need help, too. This case is a nice little puzzle, if ever there was one, and you've got twice the head on your shoulders that I have." Her kindly face brightened at his praise. "It was bully of you to come!"

"You're really not angry with me, Jimmy? You're a little glad to have me here?"

"I'm tickled to death! I'm looking forward to breakfast to-morrow already! I don't know whether you'll solve the mystery of the Barron jewels or not, but I do know that you'll give us good coffee! You should have tasted the stuff we had this morning! Fearful!"

Any woman may be a detective but not every woman can make good coffee; keenly appreciative of the difference and of her nephew's compliment, Miss Landry beamed upon him, raised herself on tiptoes and kissed him affectionately.

## CHAPTER XIII

### LIGHT AND SHADOW

"I THINK you're all to be congratulated on getting an excellent cook," said Jimmy Traynor, and pushed back his chair from the luncheon table with regret. "Those waffles were a dream."

"She's exceptionally good," admitted Philip Barron approvingly. Much of his ill-temper of the morning had vanished during the course of the meal, and toward its close he even condescended to address a few remarks to the detective. It was natural, he told himself, that a girl like Jocelyn living in the country for months at a time should take a mild interest in any personable young man from the outer world; it was foolish to concern himself over the remote chance of more serious developments. His eye was almost mild again as he turned it now upon Traynor's agreeable and ingenuous countenance. "By the way, my niece tells me that you went to the kitchen and looked her over this morning. I hope there was nothing that struck you as suspicious about her."

"Nothing at all, sir. Her references couldn't be improved upon. As for herself, she seems a plain, honest old soul—not brains or imagination enough to be crooked."

There was a clutter of plates from the pantry and a frantic warning from Jocelyn.

"Hush! For goodness' sake! She'll hear you!"

"Don't worry," said Traynor unblushingly. "She's rather deaf. Didn't you observe that fact when talking to her this morning, Miss Morand?"

"She put her hand to her ear once or twice," said Denise. "After that, I raised my voice a little."

Traynor smiled inwardly and voted his aunt an artist. It had been the shrewd old lady's own idea, which she had confided to him during their brief interview before lunch. "If you go to a placé where you want to see things," she had explained, "pretend to be blind. If you go where you want to hear things, pretend to be deaf." It was a simple and admirable precept that appealed both to his intelligence and to his sense of humor.

"You're going to persevere in your efforts to find a waitress and housemaid, aren't you?" he asked Jocelyn. He made the suggestion almost idly with no other thought than the possible lightening of his aunt's burden, but later he was to congratulate himself on the casual remark. "Our Tillie is not so young as she used to be and there may be too much work for her here."

"Jocelyn will continue to take care of the bedrooms," said Philip decisively, "and perhaps Miss Morand will be good enough to give her a hand until we find a—a professional! We mustn't take any chances with a cook like Tillie."

"I'll keep an ad in the papers," promised Miss Keith with great earnestness. "I'll drop a note to Byland's Agency and poke them up, too. They already know that we're looking for a housemaid." She sighed, "I only hope we'll get one, but Tillie herself was a miracle and I suppose it's unreasonable to expect another."

Philip went to the sideboard for a box of cigars and came back to offer them to the detective.

"What are you going to do with yourself this afternoon—or is it a secret?"

"It's not a secret," smiled Traynor, cutting the end of his cigar with nice care. "I'm going to hunt for that alligator of yours."

"I wish you luck with all my heart!"

"I suppose I ought to," chimed in Jocelyn, "but to tell the truth I'd just as soon he didn't find it. The prospect makes me shiver!"

"And what have you got to do with it?" demanded her startled uncle.

"Oh—I'm going with him! Get your hat and your butterfly net, if that's what you're taking, Mr. Traynor! I'll be ready in two minutes."

There was a chair conveniently near him, and Philip Barron sat down, breathing a little heavily. For a fleeting instant he contemplated placing a stern avuncular veto on his niece's participation in the chase, but he remembered in time that too many romances are only fostered by opposition. He contented himself with turning a glassy eye upon the detective as Jocelyn left the room.

"Will you be gone—long?"

"Most of the afternoon," said Jimmy coolly. It suddenly dawned on him that Philip was not going to approve of any attentions to his niece, and he noted this as one more obstacle to be overcome before he could reach the goal of his desire. He accepted the fact philosophically, and even thought how amusing it would be if he could only introduce Philip to his Aunt Matilda and let them deplore together the waywardness of the younger generation. "When Miss Keith returns, will you tell her that I'm waiting for her by the back door?"

He sauntered away before the embittered gentleman in the chair could think of anything to say, and drifted casually into the kitchen.

"Hello, aunty," he said, when he had made sure that they were alone. "How's your hearing?"

"I heard your doubtful compliment to my honesty," said Miss Landry grimly. "I also heard that you propose to take the Keith girl for a walk this afternoon."

"You've got ears like a dictaphone! Er—what do you think of her, aunty?"

"I think she's very pretty and I like her very much—what I've seen of her." Her ideas marched with Philip's in regard to the folly of open opposition. "But, Jimmy,—I've warned you that you're tackling something just as uncertain and even more dangerous than robbing a bank."

He laughed gaily, kissed her and went out. A minute later Jocelyn joined him and they strolled toward the pool.

From his study, whither he had repaired, Philip Barron saw them wandering away side by side, and his brows met in a frown as he stared at the man's back. Below, from a kitchen window, Miss Matilda Landry, alias Tillie Brown, was occupied in the same fashion, except that her disapproval centered on Jocelyn's unconscious person.

"Yes, she's pretty as a picture," mused the old lady, "but I don't believe she's got a scrap of common sense for all her college education. What idiots men are! Before he gets through, he's going to hurt her and she's going to hurt him, that's sure."

Frowning as deeply as Philip, she meditatively scratched her cheek with the bowl of a long-handled

spoon that she chanced to be carrying. The simple action effectually diverted the current of her thoughts, for it was the spoon with which she had just been creaming some sugar and butter.

Jocelyn was ignorant of, and Jimmy indifferent to, the indignation of their elders as they started cheerfully upon their quest. The girl no longer professed to fear the result of an encounter with an alligator, and when she asked her companion exactly what he proposed to do, her voice and manner were merely those of a child waiting eagerly to be instructed in some fascinating new game.

"We'll cross the bridge," he announced, "and follow the bank of the river up-stream—say, until we reach your Uncle Sidney's property. I told you I wanted a look at his house, you know, and this will be killing two birds with one stone. As we go, we will keep our eyes open for anything of a saurian nature—an alligator, the semblance of an alligator, or the tracks of an alligator. If we don't find anything on our way up-stream, we'll cross and come back on this side. It may console you to know that if we actually meet the creature in the flesh I have a revolver with me capable of blowing the roof off an elephant."

"Well, it's a lovely afternoon for exercise," said Jocelyn, "and the walking on each bank is quite good. There is practically no underbrush. Apart from that, I fear we are wasting our time. The sheriff and his deputy searched carefully in both directions."

"Nevertheless, it was after that search that Miss Morand saw the brute. Don't despair of our success, Miss Keith! I'm sure our eyes are better—and much more beautiful—than the sheriff's."

"True; he squints, poor man!" smiled Jocelyn.

They proceeded to put Traynor's program into execution. As they walked, they chatted with great amiability upon a score of subjects and found themselves perfectly in accord on many matters of moment—such as the great becomingness of the new hat that Jocelyn was wearing, for instance.

Despite his interest in the girl and the pleasure he was deriving from her companionship amid these pastoral surroundings, the detective did not let himself forget the more serious business upon which he was engaged. Just how much Miss Keith looked, and just how much she observed when she did look, it is impossible to say, but Jimmy really kept his keen gray eyes busy. He scanned every inch of the ground that they covered, and—it would have infuriated Philip—he also scrutinized the trees beneath which they sauntered.

It was natural that time should pass swiftly under such agreeable conditions, and Traynor uttered an ejaculation of sheer surprise when they turned a sharp bend in the little river and came upon a patch of cultivated land that stretched from the water's edge to an old weather-beaten house.

"Is this Sidney Barron's place already?" he asked.

"Yes. There is Sidney himself." She stepped behind a bush as she spoke, and the detective instinctively took cover beside her. "Do we have to go any farther? Relations are strained, you know, and he might object to our trespassing."

"No, this is far enough." He moved slightly to get a better view through the leaves of their shelter. "So that is Sidney!"

A stocky, gray-haired man was pacing up and down a narrow path near the house, a stout walking-stick in his hand, with which he occasionally cut viciously at some wild flowers that bordered the walk. Even at that distance Traynor could see that the man's hair was unkempt, that his clothes were shabby and worn, that his expression was sullen and his brow lowering. It was plain to the detective that Sidney resembled his sister, Lydia, far more than he took after Philip.

"He's no beauty," he commented. "Seems restless, too, don't you think?"

"If he has those jewels, perhaps his conscience is bothering him!"

"And if he hasn't, perhaps it's his temper!" suggested the detective, laughing. "I've seen enough, Miss Keith; if you can negotiate these stepping-stones, let us cross and go down the other side. I've drawn a complete blank so far, I'm sorry to say."

With some assistance, the girl managed the crossing very neatly. Jimmy took a last look at Sidney, then led the way down-stream. He kept a sharper watch than ever, beneath, above and to each side of them, but no "saurian traces" rewarded his efforts. He was not particularly surprised or disappointed, for he knew that he had been counting a great deal on pure luck, and he was pinning his faith more to the letter he had posted that morning than to the expedition of the afternoon.

"Here we are almost home," he remarked as a familiar landmark on the bank came into view. "You have now seen the seamy side of detective work, Miss Keith—time and trouble gone for nothing!"

"I hope the sheriff doesn't hear of our failure," said

Jocelyn. "Wouldn't you hate to be laughed at by a man who squints?"

Jimmy did not immediately reply. He was looking into the woods to his left.

"What is that tumble-down affair? An old tool-shed?"

"It used to be, when this place was farmed by Uncle Phil's father. It was cleaned out and put in order when Geoffrey and I were about eight or ten; Uncle Phil turned it over to us for a playhouse and we had wonderful times there. I guess we were a noisy pair, and he was glad to get us out of earshot."

"Suppose we take a look at it."

He turned up an almost obliterated trail that ran from the river to the shack. Jocelyn followed him. When he had pulled open a creaky door, she came and stood beside him, and they gazed into an interior that was depressingly dilapidated and uninspiring. One corner of the roof, where the beams had rotted and the winter snow had got in its work, had fallen in. Hedgehogs had had their fill of the plank floor and sideboards; one scuttled away through a hole as they appeared in the door, leaving the single room quite empty.

"Gloomy spot," said Jimmy.

"It wasn't when Geoffrey and I had our retreat here. I hate to see it falling to pieces like this. I've a good mind to ask Uncle Phil if he won't have it repaired."

"You could use it for afternoon tea—a sort of summer-house. It's cool and shady."

"We loved it when we were youngsters." Jocelyn's eyes were dreamy for a moment, then brightened with

amusement as a memory came to her. "Isn't it funny how children pick up ideas from their elders' conversation and turn them to their own uses! Geoffrey once heard uncle Phil talking about a secret hiding-place in the old house—it must have been in some connection with the jewels—and after that nothing would do but for us to have one here! I was just as enthusiastic as he was, and we worked like a pair of beavers until we made one."

"I'm not surprised. Children are as imitative as monkeys. Is it still in existence, Miss Keith? I'd like to admire your handiwork."

"Then I'll show it to you." She laughed. "It will be a great honor, Mr. Traynor, for Geoffrey and I always guarded the secret religiously!" Her gaze went to the rear wall of the building, which was sheathed with heavy boards, and her eyes were speculative as they sought for a mark she had almost forgotten. Presently she discerned it. "There you are! Do you see that knot-hole in the third plank from the end? Stick your finger in it and pull!"

Obediently he walked across the rotten floor which sagged beneath his weight, thrust his finger through the hole she had indicated, crooked it and pulled gently. The plank swung promptly outward.

There was a sharp cry from Jocelyn, watching from the door. Something had been concealed behind the plank, something which seemed to spring toward the detective, its flat ugly head thrust out at him, its cruel jaws gaping, its small wicked eyes gleaming in the dim light of the cabin. Feeling her knees giving beneath her, the girl almost fell against the jamb of the door and clung to it for support.

As for Traynor, who kept himself always in excellent physical trim, he did a standing backward jump that few professional athletes could have bettered. While he was still in the air his hand flashed to his hip pocket, but by the time he had landed on his heels and caught his balance the truth had burst upon him. He gave a laugh that was still a trifle uncertain.

"All right, Miss Keith! Did it scare you? It had my hair on end—and it was only what I was expecting to find, too, even if not just at this time and place."

A glance showed him that Jocelyn was recovering from her fright, so he stepped back whence he had leaped and stooped to seize the alligator's head. A powerful jerk and there lay unrolled upon the floor a full and magnificent skin, at least eight feet in length, complete in every detail from the spreading nostrils, painted scarlet, to the last caudal scale. Jimmy rolled it over; a glance showed him that it was lined with rubber and revealed also the simple breathing apparatus consisting of a light tube connected with a float. He grunted his approval of the whole as Jocelyn rather shakily came over to him and stood looking down at the contraption.

"Very neat!" he muttered. "Quite a scheme—eh?"

"I—I can't seem to understand——"

"There are a good many details that I don't get myself. I suppose I will in time. For the moment, though, it seems evident that this is the alligator that has been romping about your pool. It scared Grant to death, it pinched the paper he was reading and it got the jewels. Now all we have to do is identify the brainy gentleman who invented and wore one of the most original disguises I've ever heard of. That won't be

hard." He had been contemplating the skin, talking as much to himself as to his companion, and he glanced at her rather absently as she made a sound. "What did you say?"

Then he saw that her face was the color of chalk, and knew that the noise he had heard was a sharp gasp. He almost echoed it, for he read in her eyes the thought that was seering her brain. Geoffrey! It was he and he alone who shared with her the knowledge of this hiding-place; at first sight it looked remarkably as if Geoffrey and no other must have concealed in it the alligator outfit, the damning evidence of his guilt. If so, however, he must have had an accomplice, for it certainly was not he who was in the skin when Denise saw it.

The reflection came quickly to Jimmy, whose mind was fast as lightning on occasion, but it clearly had not yet occurred to the girl. A flood of pity rushed through him as he looked at her strained white face. He could imagine very easily the shock to a straightforward young woman like Jocelyn of discovering a criminal—a thief—in the person of a young man whom she must regard in the light of a brother.

Her silence, too, was pathetic. Poor child, she dared not utter her fear while there was a chance that Traynor himself had overlooked the fearful point which implicated Geoffrey!

Of course, he told himself, there might be one real service he could do her even if Geoffrey were guilty; he could recover the jewels and return them to Philip Barron with some yarn that would shield Geoffrey. Jocelyn's own illusions might be shattered, her own feelings wounded, but she would still be glad if Geof-

frey's guilt were kept from the knowledge of his adopted father. She would be glad, yes—and *grateful to the man who kept the secret!*

Jimmy dropped to his knees and began to roll up the skin. "I'm going to put this back where I found it," he said, "and if you will be guided by me, Miss Keith——?"

"Y-yes! Yes!"

"We will say no word of our find to anybody!"

He wondered if she realized his full meaning. He forbore to look at her, but his ear caught another gasp —this time unmistakably of relief. He was well satisfied, and far too clever to stress his magnanimity at this moment.

A sensation of moisture on the tip of one of his fingers caused him to glance at his hand, and for an instant he was startled. He had not cut or scratched himself, yet there was a red stain on his finger that looked amazingly like blood! Where had it come from? What was it? He scrutinized the skin that he was handling and presently discerned a red smear on its under side; he tested it with his finger and found that it was moist. For a second or two he was puzzled to account for its nature, though he was sure he had seen stuff like it before. In a moment the answer came to him. It was grease-paint. The solution arrived at, he dismissed it from further consideration, but the memory of it lingered in his head and later proved to be an invaluable help.

He jammed the skin back into the cupboard and closed the plank securely. Then he turned to Jocelyn, who had recovered much of her composure, and smiled as nicely as he knew how.

"We have a little secret just between the two of us, Miss Keith! Now, shall we call it a day and go back to the house?"

"Please. I-I'm a little tired, Mr. Traynor!"

She was silent as they went home, and he did not venture to intrude on her thoughts; he was hugely happy because she walked very close to him, as a child will walk close to the person upon whose protection it counts and depends.

Then, as if she had not had enough trouble for one day, they came abruptly upon grim tragedy. As they entered the front hall there was a scurry of feet on the stairs and Geoffrey came tearing down. He did not check his career at sight of them, in fact it might have been supposed that he did not see them but for the excited, breathless phrases that he threw at them as he raced to the hall telephone.

"Father——! In the study——! I'm calling the doctor but I—I think he's *dead!*"

With one accord, Jocelyn and the detective leaped toward the stairs and hurried up them to the study. Except for Geoffrey's frantic clicking of the telephone receiver in the hall below, an ominous silence pervaded the whole house. Jocelyn caught her breath with a sob.

Stretched on the floor in front of his desk lay Philip Barron, face down, motionless, inert. From his right temple trickled a tiny stream of blood that had already formed a considerable pool beside his head.

Traynor dropped beside the still form and made a swift but sure examination that did not occupy three seconds. Then he sprang erect and turned to Jocelyn, who stood swaying slightly as she clutched one hand

to her heart. Her eyes, wide with terror and horror, were fixed upon the revolver that was lying in her uncle's nerveless hand.

"Quick!" snapped Jimmy. "He's not dead! Hot water—a fine sponge if you have one—some clean linen for a bandage!"

She left the room swiftly to execute his orders. Traynor stooped again, gathered up the light body of the old man in his powerful arms and carried it to a leather sofa by the window, where he put a cushion under Philip's head. Then he returned to the spot where Barron had lain, partly to pick up the revolver and partly because he had heard some light object drop to the floor as he lifted the injured man. He was curious to see what it might be.

It took him nearly a minute to find it, for it had rolled under the desk. When he finally held it in his hand and saw what it was he gave a soft excited whistle.

It was a remarkably fine diamond ring, but that did not represent its sole interest for Jimmy Traynor. He was an expert on jewels, and it only needed a glance at the cutting and the quaint setting of this one to assure him that it was very old.

He felt confident that he was holding in his fingers one of the famous Barron jewels. With a quick glance toward the open door of the study, he slipped the ring into his trousers pocket.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A MOTIVE FOR MURDER

"Jocelyn! Traynor!"

It was Geoffrey's voice from the floor below. The detective stepped swiftly from the study into the hall and leaned over the rail of the stairs.

"Well?"

"The doctor is visiting a patient at a farmhouse a mile up the road," announced Geoffrey rather breathlessly. "They haven't got a telephone so I'm going to drive over. How—how is my father?"

"Still alive, but badly hurt, I'm afraid. Make haste, and tell the doctor it's urgent."

The crunching of gravel, the squealing of brakes and then the throbbing of a motor tokened the arrival of a car at the front door. Traynor went quickly to a window at the end of the hall which commanded a view of the driveway, curious to see who was arriving at this inopportune moment. It was Denise Morand in the two-seater, and when she had jumped out she turned to give a friendly hand to an elderly woman who had accompanied her, and who proved, somewhat to Traynor's surprise, to be his Aunt Matilda. She lugged a heavy suitcase after her.

The next instant Geoffrey Barron, hatless and flushed, had hurried past the women and sprung into the car. The machine raced down the short drive and lifted a noble cloud of dust as it took a reckless turn

into the highway. A second later it was lost to view. Traynor glanced at his watch, and a rather grim expression that had been resting on his face lifted a bit. Evidently the young man was obeying his injunction to hurry.

Quick light steps in the hall behind him brought him back to the business in hand. Jocelyn, panting from her haste, had brought the water and sponge and towels. They hurried to the side of the unconscious man in the study, and while the girl held the basin and handed him things as he needed them, Traynor worked as deftly as a trained nurse to wash the wound and bandage it.

They were both too preoccupied to hear Denise Morand as she came into the study, and neither of them even raised their eyes to look at her as she questioned them rapidly.

"Is something wrong? What is it? What has happened?" By that time she had reached a point in the room where she could see the figure on the sofa and the basin of crimson water in Jocelyn's trembling hands. "Oh! Mr. Barron! Is—is he badly hurt? Was it an accident?"

"He was found lying on the floor with a bullet wound in his head and a revolver in his hand," answered Traynor, rising from his completed task. "There, Miss Keith, we have done all we can for the moment. I hope the doctor will get here soon."

"A wound in his head—a revolver in his hand," repeated Denise in shocked tones. She fell back a pace, staring at the detective with wide frightened eyes. "You can't mean—you don't mean—that it was an attempt at *suicide?*"

"We have had no opportunity to determine any-

thing, Miss Morand. On the face of it, it looks like just such an attempt."

"But that's absurd! Why—it's less than an hour ago that I left here and he was—he was cheerful enough then!"

Traynor did not wish to argue the point with her. His mind was in a complete state of chaos, a jumble of theories and ideas that raced around in circles. He wanted very much to go off quietly into a corner and hold his head with both hands while he tried to get his thoughts in order, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to gratify that ambition for some time to come. From the corner of his eye he could see Jocelyn; she had slumped into a chair near the foot of the sofa and her face was the same chalky color that it had been in the cabin when Traynor had unrolled the alligator skin on the floor. She was looking at her uncle's bandaged head, but the detective knew from the expression in her eyes that she was thinking of something else. It was not difficult to guess what that might be, and he judged the moment had come for a heart-to-heart talk with the girl. That was not possible while Denise was present; he was racking his wits to find a plausible excuse to send her out of the room when a kindly Providence took pity on his plight and sent an interruption.

From across the hall came a deep rumbling voice that rose gradually in tone to a shrill falsetto.

"Denny! Where's my Denny?" A pause, and a whimper such as a wounded animal might make. "I want my Denny!"

Denise started and turned her head in the direction of the cry. She glanced at the detective.

"There is nothing I can do here?"

"Not just now, thanks."

"I must see what Miss Barron wants. Please call me if I can be of any assistance, Mr. Traynor."

"Of course."

Traynor walked to the door with her, bowed politely as she passed into the hall—and carefully shut the door behind her. He turned promptly to face Jocelyn, and he was not surprised to find that she had risen from her seat and was standing looking at him, her arms straight down her sides and her fists clenched.

"Mr. Traynor!"

"Very much at your service, Miss Keith."

"Tell me the truth! D—do you think it was attempted suicide—or—or——" Her voice, brave at the start, abruptly failed. She was on the verge of tears.

"Frankly—I hate to do any guessing, Miss Keith! Please, let's try to get a little more light on this affair before we come to any fixed conclusions." He stepped to the desk and picked up the revolver by its long barrel. It was an old-type, six-cylindered, thirty-eight-calibered affair. He held it out for her to see. "Do you recognize this weapon, Miss Keith? Do you happen to know if it belongs to your uncle?"

"I've never seen it before, I'm certain." His question and the change of subject from what was in her thoughts had the effect of steadying her. She moved in her turn to the desk and pulled out a lower drawer. "I know Uncle Phil has a revolver that is usually kept here—yes!" She took out a small, compact but powerful automatic. "He has always thought it best to keep one in the house in case of serious trouble."

"And when the trouble came—it came from behind, and he had no chance to reach his automatic."

The detective made the statement as gently as he knew how. It had to be made. As his meaning penetrated to her brain, she took two slow steps backward, and only his quick leap saved her from falling to the floor. The touch of his arms about her possibly recalled her to consciousness, for her eyes opened and sought his wildly as he half carried her to a chair.

"From—from behind! Oh, how can you be *sure?*"

"From the direction taken by the bullet. I noted that as I bandaged the wound. It would have been possible for a man to shoot himself from that angle, but most improbable. His hand would have been well behind his head, and in that case I don't think he would have fallen with his arm in the position we found it. Neither do I think he would have taken the trouble to get this clumsy old revolver when he had an automatic of his own right at his elbow."

"Then, wh-who——?"

"Let us leave that for the present. I have something else to show you." He took the ring from his pocket and held it out to her. "Is this anything you have ever seen before? It dropped to the floor—he may have been holding it in his left hand—as I picked him up."

"I have never seen it," said the girl dully, after a brief glance at the jewel. "Mr. Traynor, who——?"

"From the cutting and the setting it is easy to conclude that it is an old ring—quite old. From that we may assume that it is one of the collection we are looking for—the missing Barron jewels."

"And—and the rest?" Despite the trouble which clouded her thought, Jocelyn looked more attentively at the ring. "Where are they?"

"Ah—the answer to that is the answer to who shot

your uncle! We have located the motive at least. I believe those jewels were in this room. Whether your uncle had found them for himself and was examining them when the thief stole up and shot him, or whether he came upon the thief and was shot while trying to recover them—I don't know. The first seems the more probable hypothesis. If he had tried to get them away from the thief, there must have been *some* struggle and there's not the faintest indication of such a thing."

"Mr. Traynor, you are just talking to distract me, aren't you? You must know perfectly well what I am thinking." The girl's hands were clenched upon the arm of her chair, but she was forcing herself to speak calmly even if her voice were harsh and dry. "You see, you're a private detective, and that's not the same thing as the police, is it? Can't I speak much more frankly to you than I could to them?"

"Yes. In fact, if I read your thoughts correctly it might make a lot of trouble for this family, and bring great sorrow to you and your uncle, if you were to go to the county authorities with the theory you are entertaining. Put it into words, Miss Keith! You can count upon my discretion and my absolute willingness to help you. Just—just think of me as an older brother—for a few minutes—will you?"

"Thank you. I'm sure that you are kind and that you will help me—us. Yes, I'll put it into words. One word." Her face twitched an instant with pain, then was smooth again. "Geoffrey!"

"Exactly. Go on."

"He—he found the hiding-place—empty. He knew the secret of the cupboard where we discovered the al-

ligator skin. He is tall and slender and quite athletic, and he could have been in the disguise at the moment Grant was frightened to death. Finally, it was Geoffrey who rushed from this room—after—after——"

"After finding your uncle lying wounded on the floor!" put in Traynor quickly. "Let us accept his statement, please, until we've had a look at his side of the case."

"*Is* there one?" cried Jocelyn quickly, eagerly. "Please tell it to me—please! You can't imagine how I feel! Geoffrey and I—we've always been like brother and sister! And now! Oh, Mr. Traynor, there's something worse! I—I know he needs money!"

"Humph. Most of us do, Miss Keith, but few of us try to get it by burglary and murder."

"*Murder!*" she shuddered.

"That is the plain English of the charge you are bringing against Geoffrey."

"It's too awful! It can't be true!"

"Do you realize that if Geoffrey is at the bottom of this he must have had an accomplice?" Traynor was loath to go into details, but the sight of her distress was more than his heart could bear. "He may have had a chance to play the alligator the first time, but he certainly wasn't inside the skin when Miss Morand saw the beast. He was with us."

"Uncle said she only dreamed it!"

"And while she was dreaming, walked in her sleep and made a print like an alligator's foot! Piffle. To continue, does it seem likely to you that Geoffrey would let another person into such a fearful secret? He had the run of the house. He had no need of an accomplice. To employ one would be to risk black-

mail for the rest of his life. Also, the evidence against him so far is purely circumstantial, and I distrust that on general principle. If circumstantial evidence always pointed to the truth there would be no private detectives, Miss Keith! The police could handle everything nicely. Moreover, Geoffrey has managed to get himself so thoroughly under a shadow that I question the plausibility of any theory based on the appearances against him. He does not impress me as being a fool, but he'd have to be a very special and particular brand of fool to have bungled his job as he must have bungled this if he is guilty."

"You—you encourage me! If only we could *prove* him innocent!"

"The best way to do that, my dear young lady, is to catch the real crook! I'm going to try my best to do it, and I want all the help I can get. With your uncle seriously injured—perhaps worse—I must look to you and Geoffrey for authority to carry out any plans I make. Give me a free hand, Miss Keith! Also, I've talked to you rather confidentially this afternoon and I'll ask you to respect my trust. Don't tell a soul what you and I have learned; above all, don't let Geoffrey guess by even a glance or a hint that we have been discussing him. If I clear him, as I hope to do, it will hurt him terribly to learn of your suspicion; if we don't, I suggest that—well, that you let me handle matters as if I were really one of—of the family!"

"Indeed I will, Mr. Traynor! And of course you shall have a free hand as far as I'm concerned. As for Geoffrey——"

"Leave him to me." Jimmy noticed the automatic lying on the floor where it had fallen from Jocelyn's

loosened fingers. He picked it up, dropped it back in the drawer and shut it away from sight. "Now, I just heard a car pull up at the door. Let's hope it's the doctor. I trust I have made you feel a little more cheerful."

"You have—oh, you have!"

In a few seconds Doctor Hendricks bustled into the room, followed closely by Geoffrey. The kindly physician's face wore a look of distress that deepened as he noticed Jocelyn's presence.

"Dear me, Jocelyn, this is a very sad affair. Very sad," he greeted her as he hurried over to the sofa. He opened his bag, knelt down and commenced to remove Traynor's temporary bandage. "What made him do it?"

"Do what, Doctor?" asked the detective quietly, before the girl could reply.

"Eh? Geoffrey tells me he attempted suicide!"

"The dickens you say!" Traynor's glance as it traveled from the back of the doctor's head to Geoffrey's face was one of pure amazement. "Ah—I see! In the hurry and excitement of the moment he jumped to rash conclusions. Tut, tut! here on the desk is the revolver we found beside him. He was showing it to me only this morning and saying that he intended to clean it. I've noticed already that the cartridges have been in it a long time and the mechanism is rusted. No doubt he had trouble when he tried to break the revolver open, and his finger touched the trigger."

"Oh!" said the doctor. "That puts a very different light on matters." He had uncovered the wound by this time and he whistled softly as he bent to examine it. "Dear me, this is bad—bad!" He looked up and

shook his head gravely at their attentive faces. "The bullet lies dangerously near the brain. A delicate operation, its removal! A hospital case—a hospital case!"

"Will—will he *live?*" whispered Jocelyn.

"Dear me, who can say? It's about fifty-fifty, Jocelyn. It would be wicked to hold out more hope to you than that."

"If he lives, when will he recover consciousness?" asked the detective. "When will he be fit to be questioned?"

"If any one attempts such a thing under three weeks it will be over my dead body! Who put on this bandage?"

"I did."

"Um. As a bandage it was a mess, but it stopped the flow of blood. That may make all the difference between life and death. Geoffrey, go down and telephone the Weyburn Hospital. Tell 'em I want the ambulance here in a hurry. Jocelyn, my girl, I see you've already been busy with water and a sponge; slip downstairs and get me some more. No great hurry."

As soon as the two younger people had gone upon these respective missions, the old physician stood up and regarded the detective straightly.

"May I ask who you are, sir?"

"My name is Traynor. I'm a private investigator from New York. Mr. Barron sent for me to clear up a small matter that has been troubling him."

"I was interested in what you had to say about the shooting. Showed you the revolver this morning, did he? Said he was going to clean it! Suppose he dies, sir; will you go before the coroner at the inquest and repeat that story under oath?"

"No," said Jimmy coolly.

"Ah! I thought as much. You see I know a bit about gunshot wounds! This one is badly burned, and a man who is cleaning a revolver doesn't hold it within a few inches of his head—to the rear of the temple, too! This was either attempted suicide or attempted—murder!"

"You're quite right, Doctor. The question is, which? I am out to find the answer. Meanwhile, it will greatly help my chances if the affair is regarded publicly as an accident. Much pleasanter for the two young people, Jocelyn and Geoffrey, also. It's a tragic business any way you look at it."

"Suicide or crime. Which do you think it was? I suppose a detective should be able to tell that much!"

"I think it was crime."

"Ah. I'm not sure—hush, here's Jocelyn!"

Geoffrey came too; when he reported the ambulance as already on the way, Hendricks thanked him and ordered him from the room. There were too many people using up the air, he said. When he had given his patient's wound a second and far more thorough cleansing, he directed Jocelyn to put down the basin and leave the study also; a glance at her drawn face and he added a peremptory command to go to her room and lie down. She went mutinously. Then the old physician was free to continue his conversation with Jimmy.

"I've been thinking something over these last few minutes . . . wondering if it was my duty to tell you, Traynor—you're a professional man yourself!"

"Yes, sir!" The detective was swiftly attentive, catching the hint in Hendricks' words and manner. "If

you know anything that might help me, Doctor, it will go no further without your permission."

"It's a bit of past medical history, of so private a nature that even Jocelyn and Geoffrey don't know it. If you are debating whether or not Philip Barron has just attempted suicide, it may weigh with you."

"What is it, sir?"

"Philip's mother was a nervous, high-strung woman, given to alternate periods of hysteria and depression. There was a physical cause for that which need not concern us. The climax came one day when for no reason whatever she tried to shoot her husband."

"Glory!"

"She wounded him slightly, but he succeeded in disarming her and locking her up in a bedroom while he went for me. He recognized that it was a mental case, not an affair for the police. I returned here with him, and when we opened the bedroom door we found that the poor lady had hanged herself.—Torn a strip from her gown and taken advantage of a stout hook in the clothes-closet. She was quite dead. It was in that room just across the hall—the one Lydia Barron is in."

"Good gosh! What happened then, sir?"

"I was a young man, new to the community, and old Barron had been mighty good to me. His grief was terrible. He thought what it would mean for the four children—and, to make a long story short, I gave him a hand and we faked things to look like an accident. Philip blundered in on us and learned the truth; I doubt if any of the others know it to this day."

"Now, Doctor, tell me how you link that tragedy with what happened here this afternoon!"

"Philip, as I've told you, knew the truth. It may

easily have preyed on his mind until it caught him in a momentary mood of despondency. There's the taint in the blood to be reckoned with, Traynor; his unfortunate mother certainly suffered from suicidal tendency and homicidal mania. I'm no rabid partizan of the theory of heredity—but there you are! If what I've told you is no help to you, please *forget it!*"

"Homicidal mania!" repeated the detective almost in a whisper. His eyes were bright as they sought the doctor's. "See here, sir, you've told me so much that I'm going to ask you a question—reminding you in turn that we're professional men! Have you ever attended Sidney Barron?"

"Phew! Is *that* the way you're looking?"

"What can you tell me of his mental condition?"

"Eccentric, but not absolutely abnormal. He is sulky at times, hot-tempered at others. Not the sort of chap I'd care to have as an enemy. Beyond that—it's all speculation."

"I'm *quite* a speculator, Doctor!" Traynor laughed as he spoke, recovering his habitual manner of cheerful airiness. "You've helped me a lot, sir, and I'm very grateful to you."

"Prove it by keeping my secret!"

"What will you tell them at the hospital?"

"I've taken care of Jocelyn and Geoffrey since they were a pair of tots. I'll continue to take care of them. The accident story goes as you gave it!"

The brazen clang of a gong at the front of the house heralded the arrival of the ambulance. Five minutes later, with Geoffrey an anxious spectator of the proceedings, Philip Barron was cautiously carried to the machine and whirled away in the direction of

Weyburn. The doctor, when he had shaken hands with the two men left on the door-step, jumped into his car and followed.

"I've never seen that revolver before," said Geoffrey almost curtly. "Where did he find it? Or—or was that a cock-and-bull story you told Hendricks?"

Traynor had watched Geoffrey very closely as he had related the pleasing anecdote about Barron's intention to clean the gun, and he had noticed both astonishment and relief on the young man's face. There was little to be gleaned from these emotions that cast any light on the question of his guilt or innocence. He might have been surprised at the story of an accident because his thoughts had been centered on suicide—or because he knew that it was not an accident; he might have experienced natural relief on learning that his adopted father had not tried to commit suicide—or he might have been relieved to find that no foul play was suspected. Traynor had to correct himself hastily in regard to the last point; if Geoffrey had done the shooting he would have known all about the revolver, and a sudden fairy-tale as to its antecedents must have alarmed him. On the face of it, then, his bearing had been that of an honest man, and the way he had shot after the doctor and captured him was another point in his favor. What a mixed-up mess! Jimmy abruptly decided that he must give him the benefit of what doubt there was and, further than that, let him share in some part of the evidence thus far unearthed.

"Yes, it was a cock-and-bull story, Barron. For the doctor's benefit, and for public consumption. I had several reasons for telling that yarn, one of which was pure consideration for you and Miss Keith."

"It was not an—accident?"

"No."

"You meant well, no doubt, but I'd rather have had the truth in the beginning! Suicide! It seems incredible."

"That's the right word. No, it was not attempted suicide; it was attempted murder—cold-blooded, shoot-him-from-behind murder!"

If he had just been shot himself, Geoffrey's cheeks could not have grown whiter, nor could the manner in which he reeled back a step or two been more convincing.

"Murder!" he repeated through stiff lips. "Do you seriously tell me that some one tried to—to kill my father? Why, he didn't have an enemy in the world! What possible motive——?"

"Not so fast! He certainly did have some enemies, as you would remember if you stopped to think. As for motive—let me show you what I found underneath his body!"

He whipped the diamond ring from his pocket and thrust it almost into Geoffrey's staring eyes. Traynor could be ruthless on occasion, using any sort of trick to trap a victim.

"Ever seen this before?" he snapped crisply.

He could find no fault in Geoffrey's bearing. Only blank surprise was registered on his countenance.

"I'm positive I haven't! You say it was underneath——"

"Listen! I have just about decided that this is one of the jewels we're looking for—the famous Barron jewels! You ask what motive the would-be murderer had?" Quickly but clearly the detective related the two

hypotheses that he had already offered to Jocelyn. "Whichever is the truth," he concluded, "your father was certainly shot by somebody on account of the jewels."

There was a low cry behind them. Traynor and Geoffrey spun around as one man to discover Denise Morand standing in the open doorway. She was staring at the ring in Jimmy's outstretched hand, and now she raised a trembling finger and pointed to it.

"There's blood on them!" she muttered thickly. "Old Penobscot was right! *There's blood on them!*"

Before they could spring to her side, she had dropped, fainting, to the floor.

## CHAPTER XV

### RETURNED WITH THANKS

"DENISE!" Geoffrey raised the unconscious girl from the threshold and supported her head against his breast. She did not open her eyes. With a strength that Traynor would hardly have credited him with, the young man strode through the doorway with his burden, an expression of genuine anxiety on his face. He called over his shoulder to the detective. "I'll carry her up to her room. Find Jocelyn!"

"It isn't anything serious. Don't worry. She has merely fainted and will probably come to before you get her up-stairs."

In spite of this calm acceptance of the situation, Traynor good-naturedly bestirred himself to comply with Geoffrey's desire. He slipped past them and led the way up the stairs, which he took two at a time; a moment later he was tapping at the door of Jocelyn's room.

There was a movement within, and the door was flung open. Jocelyn was still completely dressed, but from the crushed appearance of her light gown Jimmy gathered that she had obeyed the doctor's command to lie down. Notwithstanding her pallor and the dark circles that were forming under her eyes, she was very beautiful, and he paused briefly to admire her before he bethought himself of his errand.

"Miss Morand has fainted," he said. "Geoffrey has

taken her to her room. Will you go and slap her wrists, or burn feathers under her nose, or do whatever is customary in these crises?"

"Denise *fainted!*" Jocelyn went swiftly to her bureau and returned with a bottle of smelling-salts. "I suppose these are indicated; I keep them on hand for Uncle Phil, who suffers from headaches occasionally." She led the way toward Denise's room, which was around the corner in an ell of the main building. "Mr. Traynor, do you think anything *more* is going to happen to-day? Why did she faint?"

"I'm wondering myself. I was telling Geoffrey about the ring I found in the study, and the next thing we knew there was Miss Morand pointing at the thing and saying that there was blood on the jewels and falling in a faint on the floor. Honestly, it was just like a movie."

"It sounds very queer!"

"The whole case is queer. I'm fearfully distressed about your uncle's misadventure, but apart from that I'm beginning to develop a really passionate fondness for the affair!" He laughed. "Things happen so unexpectedly and so quickly. It's like a string of Chinese fire-crackers; just when you think the end of it is reached, a few more go off with a bang."

"I detest fire-crackers," said Miss Keith. "Here we are. I don't suppose you'd better come in."

"I don't suppose I had. As a matter of fact, I'm off to do a bit of sleuthing."

Jocelyn entered upon her latest errand of mercy, and before Jimmy had reached the main hall he was joined by Geoffrey, who had been summarily evicted.

"Did she come around?" asked Traynor.

"Just beginning to when Jocelyn arrived," answered the other rather moodily. "What made her faint like that?"

"Miss Keith just asked me the same question. There seems to be a current conviction around here that I'm the chief custodian of Miss Morand's reasons for fainting. I suggest that we wait until the lady is fully recovered and then ask *her*. That's my intention."

"Where are you going now?"

"To the study. I've been frightfully careless in respect to a most important detail. My only excuse is that things have been coming too fast and furiously to be handled efficiently."

"May I come with you?"

"Glad to have you. In fact, I want to continue the little chat we were having when Miss Morand interrupted us. It won't put you off, will it, if I crawl around the floor with a magnifying-glass and generally play the heavy detective while we're talking?"

"Guess I can stand it."

They entered the study together. Traynor went straight to the desk and then gave a genuine sigh of relief. He pointed to the old revolver which lay where he had left it.

"That was what I was careless about," he explained frankly. "I never should have let it out of my sight for a moment. Really, I am surprised that it hasn't grown a pair of wings and fluttered out of the window; that's the sort of crazy stuff I'm beginning to expect in this case."

"What do you mean?"

"Why—think it over! It's more like an old Drury Lane melodrama than anything else! A crooked broth-

er—a snooping butler in cahoots with him—secret hiding-places—a bunch of ancestral jewelry that no one has seen for a generation—a paper revealing the whereabouts of the lost treasure—robbery—attempted murder—and last, but not least, m'gosh, an *alligator!* An alligator that seems to romp around as it pleases with no regard for latitude or law! Isn't that enough to lift this case out of the ordinary?"

"When you put it that way—I suppose you're right." Geoffrey greeted Traynor's summary of outstanding features with an uncertain laugh. "By the way, since you mention it, what's become of the alligator? Isn't it time he was appearing again?"

"I don't think so. I hate to do any predicting; it's just asking for trouble; but I don't *think* so. I devoted my careful attention to our saurian friend for the better part of this afternoon—and I've an idea that he won't crop up again!"

The detective slightly emphasized his last words and kept a covert watch on his companion to see how they might affect him. Geoffrey merely raised his eyebrows in what seemed to be genuine surprise and curiosity.

"You've learned something! What is it? Why won't he crop up any more?"

"Oh—call it a hunch!" grunted the disappointed Jimmy, and changed the subject. "Didn't you get back from the city unusually early to-day?"

"Yes. I'm in a stock-brokerage office, you know. One of my best customers concluded a deal with me shortly after lunch, and I decided to call it an afternoon."

"Fortunately for your father! None of the rest of us might have come near this study for hours, in which

case he must have bled to death. How did you happen to find him?"

"I went straight to my room to wash up, then came here, where I expected him to be. I wanted to tell him about the deal; it meant a lot to me and he is always interested in my business career."

Perfectly plausible. Traynor could pick no flaw in that explanation.

"What did you think when you found him?"

"I guess I was too confused to do much thinking. I saw the blood and the wound in his head—and I got the notion that he must be dead. Then I saw the revolver in his hand—and you know what I thought about that!"

"That he had committed suicide. Yes. What then?"

"I knew the doctor must be called at once. I was hurrying to the telephone when you and Jocelyn came in the front door."

"Did you touch your father's body? Move it in any way?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because somebody did." Traynor lighted a cigarette. "I saw that at once. There was a very small pool of blood where his head had first rested; a foot away, and entirely separate from it, was the second and larger pool that had formed between the time he was moved and the time you discovered him."

"Gad! You do notice things, don't you!" There was reluctant admiration in Geoffrey's voice. "But—couldn't he have moved himself?"

"Not with that wound," said Jimmy with conviction.

"Then the murderer moved him! Why did he do it? Can you think of any reason?"

"Yes. It marches with the theory that I've already given you. Suppose your father had the jewels here in the study—on the desk in front of him, no doubt. The assassin comes in behind him and sees them. He shoots. Your father drops to the floor, sweeping some of the jewels with him as he falls. The would-be murderer gets down and rakes up all he can see—that would be while the first small pool of blood was in the making—and then moves your father to look for more beneath him. Perhaps he finds some, but he certainly misses one that is left to give us a clue to the truth. The sort of clue, Barron, that often ends by hanging a man!"

"You've doped it out very well. I believe you've guessed exactly what happened."

" 'Deduced' is the politer word!" said Traynor with a grin. "I see I must educate you in the vocabulary of detective fiction!"

"Just as you please. Hello! what are you doing?"

Traynor had dropped to the floor and was going around in a circle on his hands and knees. Before he troubled to answer, he took his electric torch from his pocket and began to play it about him, paying particular heed to the area beneath the desk.

"I'm hunting for anything that our gunman may have missed. Not that I have any great hope of finding much. Has it struck you, Barron, that his stooping to pick up the jewels and even to turn your father over argues that he knew he had plenty of time at his disposal? This was no case of shoot, grab and run! What do you gather from that fact?"

"I'll leave it to you. I'm not in your class as a bright deducer!"

"Naturally not. Every one to his own job. I told you the other morning that I have a trained mind." The detective squatted on his heels and finished his cigarette thoughtfully. "The only thing I can make out of it is that he was watching the house and waiting for his chance. He saw me go out with Miss Keith. He saw Miss Morand go out with the cook—you remember they came back with the car just in the nick of time for you to go after the doctor—and he knew there was no one in the house except an old man and an invalid woman. If he were familiar with the household and its habits, he must have supposed that you also were safely out of the way for some hours. He was armed, and he figured that if he effected his entrance with due caution he would manage to get the drop on your father. A further factor of safety offered in the presence of the two stairways, front and back; if he heard any one coming up the one he had only to slip down the other and escape. Do I sound reasonable so far?"

"Perfectly."

"All right. He made his entrance and stole up-stairs. Now what was his object?"

"The jewels, I suppose."

"The jewels were already stolen. This man couldn't have known that, consequently he was not the original thief." The detective whistled and struck his knee a light tap. "Barron, there's some new blood come into the game! There are two Richmonds in the field!"

"What if he were only a casual burglar—a tramp, perhaps, looking for what he might loot?"

"That's a guess, not a deduction! I hope you see the difference. No, I prefer to believe he knew about the jewels and was after them."

"It does seem more likely. But if he knew about them he must also have known that they were hidden. How could he hope to unearth them in an hour or so when no one else had been able to for over thirty years?"

"History repeats itself! Suppose this man believed that your father knew the secret? *What happened to William Barron?"*

Geoffrey had been seated in his father's chair. At the detective's question, he sprang to his feet with a sharp oath; his fists were clenched and his eyes were blazing.

"They tortured him! They tortured him to make him tell! By gad, Traynor! Was *that* what this fellow was after to-day?"

"I think it is possible."

"Go on! If you're right, and if we ever catch the devil, I'll tear him to pieces with my bare hands!"

"The punishment would fit the crime beautifully. However, to continue: the man wasn't waiting, then, for this to be an empty house, but for the moment when your father was alone in it. His opportunity came. He crept in, stole softly up-stairs, made his way to the study and discovered his victim actually looking at the jewels! He shot him—sneaked up close and shot him! Then he took his time about collecting his loot and finally made his leisurely exit from the house. Next question: Why did he shoot him?"

"To save himself trouble—and dead men tell no tales!"

"An ingenious answer, but I think I've got a better one. I believe he shot your father because otherwise your father would have recognized him. A casual thug

unknown need only have stuck him up, tied and gagged him and departed with his loot; he wouldn't have added murder to robbery."

"Traynor, this may be ordinary stuff for you, but you've drawn a picture that I don't care to look at. It's too ghastly. Where is the brute who would do such a thing? *Who is he?"*

"I haven't deduced that just yet," said the detective with a smile. His opinion of Geoffrey was gradually going up; he found it hard to believe that a guilty man could comport himself so correctly as he heard his probable movements described graphically by the detective who was hot on his trail. "Sorry if my gruesome deductions have curdled your blood; we'll close the chamber of horrors for the rest of the day!"

"Thanks!"

"Let us speak of pleasanter things. For instance, isn't it lucky that the cook is deaf?"

"Is she deaf? And why is it lucky?" Geoffrey mopped his brow and the back of his neck with a handkerchief. "I suppose if I had a trained mind I could deduce what you're driving at."

"I'm thinking of dinner; do you know it's nearly seven? If Tillie Brown weren't deaf, and consequently hadn't missed nine-tenths of the excitement around here to-day, she would be so nervous that dinner would certainly be late, if not ruined. A good cook is a highly sensitive organism."

While Geoffrey was digesting this dictum and marveling at a man who could so lightly switch from murder to meals, the detective rose to his feet. The study was growing dark, and instinctively he reached for the reading-lamp on the desk and lighted it. Instantly there

came to him the memory of the previous evening when its powerful rays had helped him to solve one small mystery.

"Did your father tell you what we found last night?"

"No. Not a word. What was it?"

"I cautioned him against speaking about anything to anybody; it's the safest plan in this sort of investigation. Conditions are a bit altered now, of course. I was telling Miss Keith a while ago that henceforth I must look to you and her for my authority, and consequently it is only fair that you should be kept informed of the progress of events. If I tell you things, however, you must keep them to yourselves."

"All right. Begin with what you found last night. I trust it isn't another horror story?"

"No." Traynor had shifted his position a trifle so that Geoffrey, looking at him, had his eyes turned toward the light. "Did you ever hear a story to the effect that there was a paper in existence containing a clue to the whereabouts of the jewels?"

"Yes, I've heard the story." Geoffrey's eyes did not waver; they only seemed deeply interested. "What about it?"

"We found the place where that paper had been concealed—in this desk."

"In this desk!" The young man glanced at the piece of furniture incredulously, and his gaze certainly did not rest perceptibly on the brass plate which held the inkstands. "Why, it doesn't seem possible after the number of times it has been searched, but I suppose you know what you're talking about! Where was it?"

"There," said Jimmy, and pointed to the brass. Cir-

cumstantial evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, if Mr. Geoffrey Barron were nursing any guilty secret it was not to be shaken out of him by surprise! "Under that plate is a shallow compartment. Those screw-heads were concealed by caps before Grant disturbed them."

"And the paper?"

"Gone, of course. Grant got that. There was nothing in the recess but a bit of sealing-wax and—this!" Jimmy fished in his pocket and produced the slip of paper bearing the drawing of an alligator. "Our playful pet again, you see!"

"I'm blessed!" murmured Geoffrey. "No wonder you describe that animal as romping around! How did he get there? Grant left it, I suppose."

"No, he didn't. I've settled that point to my satisfaction, though I don't care to tell how at this time. There are several little things that I don't wish to talk about just yet."

"I'm going to have a look at your secret compartment," said Geoffrey, standing up. He knew the location of the tool-box and produced the same screw-driver that Philip had used the evening before. He came back with a determined expression in his eye. "I'm going to see what *one* of the family mysteries looks like!"

Traynor obligingly removed the ink-wells and the stamp-box, then lounged against the desk and watched carelessly as Geoffrey set to work. He did not speak until the last screw was out, and wished afterward that he hadn't spoken then.

"Pity you didn't get a shot at it about a week ago. It's empty now, of course."

"Empty!" Geoffrey had raised the plate and with a quick gesture snatched from the compartment beneath an oblong slip of paper, yellowed with age. He looked at it—then laid it on the desk in front of the astounded detective. "Empty, eh? Was that a deduction?"

Jimmy picked it up and read aloud a line of faded script written in a cramped hand.

" 'Right from the crane—eight—up six—left three.' "

"The very paper we were speaking of!" said Geoffrey. "The clue to the hiding-place in the kitchen! There used to be a crane there—the old hinge is still left. The numbers evidently refer to the bricks; count eight from the crane, six up, then three to the left. Golly!"

"Yes, it's the clue sure enough," said Traynor musingly, "and having served its purpose, it is now returned to us with thanks by the thief." He drew a long breath and expelled it slowly. "My holy aunt! What a nerve!" He tapped the paper gently. "I think we may add this to the score against Sidney; whoever found it and used it must have been familiar with the house—so familiar that he could go straight to the place where there used to be a crane."

"Uh-huh. I guess that deduction will wash without shrinking!" Geoffrey glanced at the document which Traynor was holding up to the light. "Turn it over; there's something more on the back."

The detective obeyed. Then the paper fluttered from his fingers to the desk, where it lay while the two men regarded it for a full minute in silence. Finally Geoffrey laughed abruptly, and as if the noise released his own pent emotions, Traynor swore softly.

Once more they were looking at the rough sketch of an alligator, but this differed in marked fashion from any of its three predecessors. Here the animal was depicted sitting up on its tail, its two front legs akimbo, a broad grin on its long snout and a bag upon which was written the word "jewels" suspended from a rope about its neck. The cause of its mirth was apparent in the figure of a man in front of it—a man who was peering through a magnifying-glass as big as himself in exactly the opposite direction from his prey.

## CHAPTER XVI

### MISS LANDRY REPORTS

Matters arranged themselves very nicely that evening to further a devout desire of Jimmy Traynor. For some hours, ever since the attempt on Philip's life, he had been earnestly wishing for a chance to talk with his aunt. He might have clothed himself in the dignity of his profession and loftily announced that he had some questions to ask her in the privacy of the kitchen, but he did not care to call attention to the interview if he could possibly manage to obtain one secretly.

As luck would have it, however, he was given a clear field of action. Denise did not come down to dinner, and though she was inclined to argue the point, she finally consented to remain quietly in bed until the following day, when presumably her nerves would be restored to normal. Her temporary defection left the invalid, Lydia Barron, with no attendant, and as Miss Barron happened to be unusually restless that evening, it was necessary for Jocelyn to remain with her until she should drop asleep.

"She seems to sense trouble," explained Jocelyn to Jimmy at the dinner-table. "Perhaps she can feel it in the air the way some people can feel electricity. Of course, she doesn't know what has happened and she couldn't understand it if she did, but her eyes are large and wild and she keeps muttering, 'What is

wrong? Something is wrong! What is wrong?' over and over. Poor soul! Of course it's awfully decent of Uncle Phil to give her a home, but I wouldn't be sorry if he decided to send her to some trustworthy institution. Would you, Geoffrey?"

"There's no such place around here, and if she were sent to a distant one she would lose the services of Cosgrove. To give him his due, she does seem to be progressing under his treatment."

"I wish she had progressed a bit faster and sooner," threw in Traynor sadly. "If she were only normal now she could undoubtedly tell us a lot about what occurred in the study this afternoon. I noticed the door of her room was open, and in order to enter the study opposite the amiable gentleman with the revolver must have passed it. If she had been in possession of her normal senses she might have seen him and given us some definite clue to his identity." He hesitated. "I'm almost tempted——"

"Tempted to what?" asked Jocelyn as he stopped speaking.

"To ask you to question her as gently as possible. Even an incoherent phrase or two might put us on the track. If she saw anything, if she received any impression even subconsciously, she might be induced to—to babble it out."

"Bad business," said Geoffrey firmly. "Except with the consent of her doctor, and in his presence, no such attempt should be made. It would be a risky affair, poking up a brain already deranged, and might result in giving her a serious setback."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Jocelyn decisively.

"I knew you'd both feel that way about it," com-

mented Jimmy gloomily. "Of course, you're dead right."

The telephone-bell in the hall rang at that moment, startling them all, as telephones will when any crisis is toward. Geoffrey hastened to answer it and returned to the dining-room with a worried face.

"That was Hendricks, phoning from the hospital. Father's condition is not very satisfactory, although he stood the trip well. They have had a consultation and have decided that there is some pressure on the brain from the bullet, so—they're going to operate this evening."

Jocelyn's hand went to her throat. Traynor looked grave.

"Did Hendricks sound hopeful?" he asked.

"I think so, considering the gravity of the case. He says father has a wonderful constitution and should pull through unless there are unforeseen complications." Geoffrey drummed nervously on the table. "I don't feel like waiting here for the news of the operation; I'm going to drive over to the Weyburn Hospital. Care to come along, Traynor?"

"No, thank you. If you're going to Weyburn, though, I'll get you to do an errand for me."

"An errand?"

"It's very important. Of course the post-office in Tarryville is closed now, but the one in Weyburn will be open. I have a parcel and two letters that I want posted. You'll attend to it for me?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey reluctantly. "I have to pass the post-office on my way to the hospital."

Traynor went to his room and got the parcel and the letters, which he had hurriedly prepared and writ-

ten just before dinner. In the package was the revolver with which Philip Barron had been shot, and he was sending it to a finger-print expert in New York with requests for photographs and enlargements of any prints that might exist on the butt.

Geoffrey left immediately. The detective turned to Jocelyn almost apologetically.

"Please don't think I'm a brute for refusing to accompany him. I have an excellent reason that you shall know some day. As for the errand I gave him to do, those letters are awfully important and, besides that, the business of mailing them will take his mind off his worries for a few minutes anyway."

"I have found you very considerate and kind so far," said the girl quietly. "Before I go up to Aunt Lydia, tell me one thing, please. What conclusion have you reached about—about Geoffrey?"

The steadfast courage with which she put the question was altogether admirable. Traynor recognized it, and if it had been necessary to lie in order to reassure her he would have lied with even more than his usual facility and grace.

"I have just handed him a very material piece of evidence and two letters that I should certainly not care to have read by the chief crook of this criminal drama. Is that answer enough? If it isn't, I'll tell you that I believe Geoffrey is as innocent as you or I."

She caught her breath and her eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you," she said huskily. She was fond of the youth with whom she had grown up, but until Traynor had spoken the comforting words she could never have credited herself with caring as much for him as she apparently did. She realized now that more

terrible than the theft of the jewels, more terrible than the brutal assault upon her uncle, had been the harrowing fear that Geoffrey was guilty of both crimes. Her starry eyes sought the detective's, and she thrust out her hand to his. "If you knew what a load you have lifted from my heart!"

"I'd rather do that than hang a hundred murderers," said the detective. As impulsively as she held out her hand, he took it in one of his and bent to kiss it. Then he dropped it like a hot coal as Matilda Landry entered from the pantry, saw the gallant gesture and dropped three coffee cups and a lacquer tray. "Er—you're going right up-stairs? Then I'll see you later when Geoffrey comes back."

"Yes, of course." Jocelyn stepped over to the scene of the ceramic accident. "Tillie, you must really be more careful! That is our best china."

"Sure an' I'm sorry, mum. But there's no great harm done. As the sayin' goes, they're not so much hurt as shaken." The cook cast a soft and languishing eye upon one James Traynor. "It's me emotions, mum. I was young once meself, an' when I see two young folks headin' for happiness an' hell——"

"We'll have breakfast at the usual time, Tillie!" remarked Jocelyn Keith, and the coldness of her voice contrasted oddly with the hotness of her cheeks. "You may clear the table now."

"I beg pardon, mum." The cook cupped her ear. "Did ye say I was to clear out?"

"I said you could clear the *table!*" cried Jocelyn in a carrying voice, and fled the room.

Miss Landry waited until her receding footsteps were well on their way. Then she spoke.

"The modern girl is a shy and bashful creature," she said, diverging amazingly from the trend of current opinion. "In my day, while a man kissed one of a girl's hands she slipped the matrimonial noose around his neck with the other. The fair sex is growing effeminate. *O tempora, o mores*——"

"Tell it to the tea-kettle," suggested Jimmy Traynor with a malevolent glance. "Matilda N. Landry—the *N* standing for Nuisance—if I knew the secret of the Borgia poison that never leaves a trace I'd give you a couple of shots of it to-morrow in your coffee."

"Better take 'em yourself! A nice detective you are! Off gallivanting with a girl while your employer gets bitten by an alligator. If his life insurance company knew he'd hired you, they'd have doubled his rate until you quit the job."

"No, they wouldn't, not so long as they knew I had such an excellent pair of ears supporting me!" retorted her nephew sweetly. "Where were *you,* Ears? I leave the house in your charge and you go off buggy-riding while a double-eyed devil walks in and commits eight or ten varieties of crime at his leisure!"

"The truth of the matter, Jimmy," said his aunt soberly, "is that we neither of us have much to be proud of at this minute; however, if we're going to indulge in mutual recriminations let's go into the pantry."

It was sound advice. They went to the pantry.

"I've been waiting half the afternoon for a chance to talk with you," remarked Jimmy Traynor, as his aunt put down a heavy trayful of dishes in the sink. He lighted a cigarette and started to sit down on a convenient chair, but he caught his aunt's eye, halted his

descent in mid-air, threw the cigarette out of an open window, straightened up and meekly armed himself with a dish-towel. "What happened, and who did which, while I was covering another feature of the case?"

"While you were promenading with the Keith girl!" corrected Miss Landry with a snort. "There she is, a fine, able-bodied young woman with money of her own, accepting a home and her living from Philip Barron and wishing at the same time that he'd send his poor invalid sister to an institution! Mmph!"

"Oh, you heard that, did you? She didn't mean anything unkind. As for the promenade, I'm the sort of a man who can do two things at once—on occasion, three or four. I got what I went after, and if you'll give me a chance to speak I'll tell you what it was."

Miss Landry had her share of curiosity; she was silent fully fifteen minutes while Jimmy told of the alligator skin, the secret lock known only to Geoffrey and Jocelyn, the girl's fear that her cousin might be guilty and his own conviction that he wasn't.

"That's not so bad for a day's work," admitted Miss Landry. "I suppose you will trace the alligator outfit to its owner without very much trouble?"

"I think so. It is a beautiful piece of work and only the best costumers could turn it out. The nearest place it could be obtained is New York City. Even before I found the skin I guessed that a disguise must be the only explanation of an alligator in Tarryville, so I wrote this morning to Pierce and Cobden; they will send a man to all the theatrical supply houses in the city, and if any of them made the contraption it will be remembered and the name of the purchaser—or his

description—recalled. I think that is a step in the right direction."

"It was clever of you to think of it," said his aunt frankly. "I thought of it myself and was going to suggest it."

"And you say it with a perfectly straight face!" marveled her nephew. "But let's get down to brass tacks. Did you hear or notice anything interesting this afternoon?"

"Not very much, Jimmy." Miss Landry, to his great delight searched in the big pocket of her kitchen apron and brought forth a notebook. "I've jotted things down here. Shall I tell them to you or shall I just read the entries?"

"Read them, aunty!"

"Uh-huh." The old lady found her glasses, placed them on her nose and scanned the pages of her diary. "Here we are; I've marked the time against each item. 'Two-fifteen, Jimmy and Keith girl gone for a walk. There's no fool like a middle-aged fool.'" Miss Landry stopped reading and looked up. "Excuse me, Jimmy, I forgot I'd put in that bit of philosophy."

"I don't see why you should call Jocelyn Keith middle-aged! However, go on."

"'Two-thirty. Was mixing cake when Morand woman came in. Asked me if I had no baggage. Only person so far with sense enough to think of it. Told her I'd left heavy suitcase checked at station. She offered to drive me in to get it. Suggested three-thirty. Thanked her and accepted. Went on with cake. Two-forty-five——"

"I'd like a piece of that cake right now," interrupted Jimmy Traynor. "Where is it?"

"In Alligator Pool. I left it too long in the oven. If you laugh at me, you young wretch——!"

"I'm not laughing. Go on with the record."

"'Two forty-five. Heard voices up-stairs. Steady conversation. Decided to listen to it. Went up back stairs. Morand woman talking to Barron in study. Crept to door. Two-fifty. Back in kitchen. Morand woman heard me. Stuck head out and asked me what I wanted. Made her repeat question three times, then told her I was going to my room for handkerchief. Seemed to satisfy her. Three. Outside study door. Three-five. Back in kitchen. Couldn't hear her, but Morand woman heard me. Ears like a hawk. Told her——'"

"Ears like a hawk, aunty?"

"My mistake. I meant ears like a police dog. 'Three-fifteen. Went to room and put on hat. Three-thirty. Morand woman ready with car. As we went past front of house Barron called to us from hall window. Not going to town, please bring mail if any. Four-thirty. Arrived back. Considerable excitement. Barron found shot. Four-thirty-five. Back in kitchen. Prepared chicken for roasting. Four-fifty——'"

"You're a cool customer," broke in Traynor with honest admiration. "At four-thirty you learn that your employer has been shot and at four-thirty-five you start dinner! Why the delay?"

"I had to take off my hat," explained his aunt.

"Oh. I should have thought of that, of course. Never mind going on with the time-table, aunty. You've already covered the points I am interested in."

"What are they?"

"Who was the last person to see Barron before he

was shot, for one thing. He was all right when you left?"

"Obviously, since he spoke to us."

"Um. Geoffrey was in the train on his way from town, Miss Keith and I were fooling around the river, you and Miss Morand were out in the car; that accounts for all the household. Poor Barron was alone—if we except his invalid sister. Now, who in thunder came into this peaceful home and shot down an old man?"

"Do you think you can find out, Jimmy?"

"I'm going to make a jolly good try at it! So Miss Morand was talking to him in the study just before you both left?"

"Yes. Over half an hour."

"You didn't catch a word of their conversation?"

"No. I'm sorry, Jimmy, if you think it was important. I did my level best to listen in."

"I don't see how it concerns us as long as she has such a clean-cut alibi. Whoever shot him, it couldn't have been Miss Morand."

"It was the alligator, I suppose."

"No, I don't think so. I learned a few things to-day, aunty, that lead me to believe there is more to this case than we expected. Let me tell you the whole story to date . . ."

He went through it carefully from beginning to end, drying the dishes as Miss Landry slowly washed them. She listened attentively, asking a question once in a while that did credit to her shrewdness. But at the end, when the account was finished and the last dish put away, she shook her gray head rather hopelessly.

"Unless it's the brother, Jimmy, I don't see where

anything points. His letter to the butler puts him at the head of the suspect list. He was at the inquest and heard about the paper Grant was reading; he may think that Philip got hold of the clue and found the jewels, and then he might have let his wickedness get the better of him—homicidal mania, as your doctor-man calls it—and decided to come down and threaten his brother face to face. You say you saw him walking around his place while you were up the river?"

"Yes."

"Then you came down—slowly; you stopped at the hut and found the alligator skin; you talked about that a while with Miss Keith. Would all that elapsed time have been enough for Sidney to come down the road, do the job and get out of sight before Geoffrey turned up?"

Traynor thought back carefully.

"Yes, I believe he would have had time and to spare."

"Good. Well, if you saw *him* there's a chance that he saw *you,* even if he didn't show it. With you and the girl fooling around up-stream, he might have walked down here just in time to see me and Miss Morand drive off in the car. You can bet if he's in it as deep as we think, he knew every member of the household, and consequently he knew that his chance had come." Miss Landry's usually placid brow was wrinkled. "I can't help thinking it was Sidney."

"If it was, he got the jewels—bless his sinful soul!" Traynor sat down, put his chin on his hands and was very thoughtful for some minutes. His aunt did not interrupt him. Finally he looked up, and there was a sparkle in his eye that had been missing for over a

week. He laughed softly. "My golly, aunty, I know how we can find out if he has 'em or not!"

"How?"

"Wait and see! Wait until I perfect the details! It's a peach of a scheme but it's not complete yet!"

"It's not—dangerous, Jimmy?"

"Not in the least, my dear woman!"

"You're so apt to be rash when anything like jewelry is in question," complained his aunt. "By the way, can I see the ring you found in the study?"

He handed it to her. She slipped it on her finger, held it up to the light and admired its flashing brilliancy, then took it off again and returned it to him.

"And the rest? If you succeed in recovering them—what will you do with them, Jimmy?"

He was serious at once. He stood up and kissed her.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I don't know. I'm fond of jewelry, aunty—but I'm *awfully* fond of Miss Keith!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### DENISE ACCEPTS A BRIBE

With that frank admission of the uncertainty of his intentions, Jimmy judged it time to bring his interview with his aunt to an end. He left a parting injunction.

"Keep your ears open."

"Trust me, my boy. But what am I to listen for? Hasn't about everything happened that can?"

"Exactly the way I feel, Miss Landry, and exactly the reason why I intend to take every precaution against more ructions! Each time I have found a theory or ventured a prophecy, or deduced a deduction, something has turned up to knock the theory, prophecy or deduction galley-west." Jimmy laughed, but the laugh was accompanied by a serious shake of his head. "I'm getting nervous as a cat."

"That's not like you," commented his aunt. "The truth is, you're thinking too much about that girl. When you ought to be using the perfectly good brain that you inherited from your mother's side of the family, you're off in a corner kissing her hand. You can't mix——"

"Good *night!*" said Mr. Traynor hastily.

He regained the dining-room barely a minute before the subject of Miss Landry's animadversions came down the front stairs. She heard him moving about and came to the door.

"You're still here!"

"I didn't bother to shift," said the detective. "I've just been sitting here, smoking and trying to think. How are your patients?"

"I don't know anything about Denise. Aunt Lydia finally went to sleep, thank goodness." She came into the room, glanced at her wrist-watch and sat down. She was up again at once and began to move about in a restless fashion that spoke of tension. "I do wish we could hear from Geoffrey!"

"This has been a tough day for you, Miss Keith; I'll be glad for your sake when it is ended. Tell me about your aunt—she didn't drop anything relative to what she might have seen or heard?"

"Not while she was still awake. After she went to sleep and just before I left the room, I heard her muttering something. I bent over her and listened. As nearly as I can remember she said: 'I want the alligator. Show me the pretty alligator!' I waited a few minutes to see if she would say anything else, but she didn't."

"Glory be!" ejaculated Traynor. He laughed helplessly. "I don't suppose she has been visited by his saurian majesty, do you? No doubt she has caught the word from our conversations across the hall and it has lingered in her subconscious memory. Yes, that must be the explanation." He extinguished the butt of the cigarette he was smoking, threw up his empty hands resignedly and smiled at Jocelyn. "When this affair is ended, if anybody says alligator to me for the next six months it will be at the peril of his life!"

The girl started to answer, but the words were frozen on her lips by the sharp summons of the telephone-

bell in the hall. In response to the mute appeal from her eyes, the detective went to answer it.

The call was from Geoffrey at the hospital. The operation had been entirely successful. The bullet had been removed and the pressure relieved. His father had rallied amazingly from the double shock of the wound and the operation. The surgeon was pleased, and the doctors believed all would go well.

"Praise beans for some good news at last!" said Traynor fervently as Geoffrey finished speaking. "Tell me, did the bullet have the picture of an alligator etched on it?"

"What? Oh—no!" Geoffrey Barron managed a laugh that told more clearly than words how tired he was. "Tell Jocelyn that I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"Hold on, my friend; make it thirty! You're in no shape to drive back from Weyburn in less. Did you mail my parcel and letters?"

"I did; good-by."

Jocelyn gave a sob of thankfulness when he returned to the dining-room with the encouraging bulletin. She insisted upon waiting up for Geoffrey's return, though Traynor besought her to go to bed and get some much needed rest.

"It will leave us in a nice fix if you crash, Miss Keith."

"I shan't crash. How about yourself? There's no special reason for your staying up. I imagine that even the best detective must sleep occasionally."

"Our badge is always the open eye. Shall we raise the windows here and leave this smoky room to air out? I noticed a piano in the drawing-room across the hall; do you play?"

Jocelyn automatically yielded to his tact and thoughtfulness. For half an hour she played popular music, her foot on the soft pedal from regard for the sleepers up-stairs, while the detective stretched himself at fell length on a massive, draped couch and smoked a chain of cigarettes. She played correctly but with no particle of feeling, and Traynor considered her talent marvelous.

She rose from the stool and smiled at him as Geoffrey drove up to the door.

"You did that on purpose to distract my thoughts, Mr. Traynor, just as you gave Geoffrey that errand to do! Actually, I feel fresh and rested compared to the way I felt when I came down from Aunt Lydia!"

"Perhaps you're right, Miss Keith. At all events, I will be handsomely repaid if you will think of me, not as a hired detective, but as a real—friend."

Before she could reply—and perhaps the color in her cheeks was acknowledgment enough—Geoffrey was with them.

Traynor lingered until the young man had repeated and amplified his telephoned report, and he still lingered as they started for the stairs. Geoffrey looked at him inquiringly.

"You're not ready to call it a day?"

"I'll be up in a few minutes. Good night."

When he had heard their respective doors shut, the detective made a tour of the lower floor. He locked every door and window, front and back, and when he was sure that he had made the house reasonably secure, he extinguished the lights and sought his own bed. Miss Landry's withering taunt, that he had permitted his employer to be assaulted while he himself was off

gallivanting with a girl, had gone deep and still hurt. If there were to be any more contretemps in this case he was determined that they should arrive through no neglect on his part.

His first care in the morning was to settle himself in the study and request the honor of a chat with Miss Morand. She came at once, looking a trifle pale but otherwise remarkably fit. He greeted her pleasantly, and settled her in a comfortable chair.

"You're feeling all right again?"

"Perfectly, thank you," she answered in her rich warm tones. "I must apologize, Mr. Traynor, for yesterday afternoon. I was—much upset."

"We all were, I think. Was there anything special that disturbed you?"

"N-no; nothing special." A smile trembled on her lips. "I am rather ashamed of myself for one thing—may I confess and receive absolution?" He nodded. "Well, I was guilty of eavesdropping while you were talking to Geoffrey Barron! Not altogether a woman's curiosity, Mr. Traynor; I have grown to like Philip Barron during the past few months and I was deeply shocked by his shooting, especially when I learned that you thought it was attempted suicide!"

"You've got me mixed up with Geoffrey; I went on record as believing it an accident."

"An accident!" The soft voice was faintly scornful. "You think it was an accident!"

"Suppose you tell me your own opinion instead of asking me rhetorical questions," suggested Traynor quietly. "I will listen with care for I know that Mr. Barron thinks highly of your intelligence. Why are you so positive it wasn't attempted suicide?"

"Because that's absurd! I was talking to him not an hour before the shooting and he was quite cheerful then. After that, he called down as I was leaving with the cook and asked me to bring him his mail, if there were any. Does a man about to commit suicide talk and act like that?"

"There you go, asking questions again! What were you speaking to Mr. Barron about—if it's not too private a subject?"

"There was nothing private about it at all. I came here for a few months at Jocelyn's suggestion to take care of Miss Barron. The work is not pleasant, as you may imagine, and from the point of view of a woman who has her own way to make in the world it is all rather a waste of time. I didn't put it quite so bluntly to him yesterday, but I told Mr. Barron I would like to leave as soon as he could get a nurse to replace me. He was very nice about it and seemed resigned to the idea of my going." A sparkle of humor lighted her fine eyes. "Theoretically, one is supposed to tell everything to a detective! Does that include gossip? If so, I will add that one reason he may welcome my leaving is his fear that I may marry Geoffrey if I stay!"

"Oh. Er—would you?"

"Not in a thousand years!"

"So much for that." The comment sounded quite as casual as his question, but inwardly Traynor was surprised to note that her emphatic reply afforded him a perceptible sensation of pleasure. He had no difficulty in accounting for the feeling almost as quickly as he detected it. Geoffrey was not such a bad fellow as far as he went, but he wasn't nearly good enough for this nice, clever, self-supporting and most attractive young

woman. The detective paused briefly to register a mental hope that she might make a better matrimonial bargain than Geoffrey, then resumed his questioning of the girl. "Now, as far as I can make out, your conversation with Mr. Barron took place about an hour before the shooting. Is that right? Very well. Now, tell me, when you were talking to him here in the study, did you notice any jewels lying around?"

"Jewels!"

"Jewelry, if you prefer."

"Certainly not! That was what upset me so when I heard you telling Geoffrey about the ring you found."

"I see. You knew about the Barron jewels, of course. When did you first hear about them?"

"I can tell you exactly; it was the day you came here for permission to fish Alligator Pool. Geoffrey and I were in the summer-house—you remember?—and he had just been telling me their history."

Traynor did remember; he had listened to the story himself with great interest, though he did not think it necessary to admit the fact to Miss Morand.

"He told you Penobscot's remark about there being blood on them?"

"Y-yes! That flashed across my mind when you were showing the ring to Geoffrey. I realized then how true it was, and when I thought of that cowardly attack on a poor old man——"

"You fainted. I don't blame you," said Traynor nervously, for she looked very much like fainting again at the memory. "Please pull yourself together, Miss Morand, or I shall think that Mr. Barron's opinion of you is a bit too flattering." He was gratified to note the instant effect of his caustic remark. "That's

better. Now tell me your own ideas as to this case. Who do you think stole the jewels?"

"Do you mean the first time or the second?"

If she had suddenly reached over and stuck a pin into him Jimmy Traynor could not have jumped higher, and his expression as he came down was a handsome tribute to her quality of perception.

"You think there were two robberies, Miss Morand?"

"I may be wrong. I'm not a detective. But the jewels were certainly stolen last week, and if they turned up in this study yesterday, as you think, they were certainly stolen again. Am I right or not?"

"You're right. What's more, a simple logical deduction seems to have leaped to your mind where it had to be driven into mine!" He smiled encouragingly. "All the more, I await with interest your theory of the criminal's identity."

"Sidney Barron!" she answered compactly.

"Ah. How did you reach that conclusion?"

"It is difficult to say. A woman doesn't think the same way that a man does. You want a lot of what you call proof before you'll consider a man guilty—but I'm pretty well satisfied to accept the note he sent to poor Grant as sufficient evidence of Sidney's guilt. I have wondered why you hesitate—why you don't take some decisive action against him!"

"Oh—you *have!*" Nettled, Jimmy Traynor sent her a glance that should have shriveled her. "If you're inclined to question my conduct of this case, let me tell you——"

He checked himself. He had no intention of telling Denise Morand or any one else what he had achieved

to date. He sat down again on the chair from which he had abruptly risen.

"I beg your pardon."

"I should beg yours," said Denise, and the twinkle was back in her eye as she added solicitously, "I do hope I haven't hurt your feelings?"

"I'm not so sensitive as all that," retorted Jimmy untruthfully. "Shall we change the subject? Do you know how to use an automatic?"

"Gracious! That is a change! However, I do."

The detective opened a drawer in the desk beside him and took out the weapon that Jocelyn had shown him.

"Keep this!" He looked at her dress with some disfavor. "I thought you usually wore a blue thing with a pocket in it."

"A blue thing with a pocket in it! I suppose you mean that gingham apron I put on in the morning——"

"It can be a ball-gown for all of me as long as it has the pocket. Wear it, and slip this gun in the pocket."

"You're very melodramatic, Mr. Traynor!"

"On the contrary, I'm trying to insure you all against any more melodrama. There's been enough of it around here lately. Mr. Barron called you level-headed, didn't he? I endorse his opinion by giving you this automatic. I can't be in the house all day, and if I have to go out it will be a comfort to me to feel that you are on the job—armed!"

"But—armed against what? Against whom?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Perhaps like that artist chap I should say I have a presentiment that 'something heavy, heavy hangs o'er this house' and let it go at that. Will you do as I ask?"

"Of course." Denise took the automatic and examined it swiftly in a fashion that bore out her claim to understanding them. "Shall I leave you now and put on the blue thing with a pocket?"

"Please—and thank you for answering all my questions so frankly and helpfully." He went to the door and opened it for her. "Next time you see an alligator, don't faint—shoot!"

She gave him a nod and a smile, and she was still smiling as she went straight to her room and slipped into the house apron. She put the small automatic in the pocket, and when she had packed a handkerchief on top of it, she decided that it was not too conspicuous.

Her next thought was for her patient. She went quietly to Lydia Barron's room and discovered the invalid sound asleep, making up, perhaps, for her restlessness of the previous evening. Denise was very glad to find her services not required. Her head ached a little, and she welcomed the opportunity to get out-of-doors. She took a book that she had been reading, intending to settle herself down in a chair by the pool, where she would still be within hearing of Lydia's voice if she should call.

She went down the front stairs, and as she was very light on her feet and as her slippers had soft soles, she made practically no noise. When she got to the foot of the stairs, however, she chanced to give a little cough —and as if in response to it there came from the drawing-room on her left a heavy footfall and then a sort of a dull thump.

Denise supposed that it must be either Jocelyn or the detective, since it was improbable that the cook would be in the front of the house, and she stepped into the

room with the idea of telling whichever of them it might be that she was going out under the trees.

To her great astonishment, the drawing-room was empty; she saw that at a glance, and she halted just over the threshold and asked herself if she could possibly have been mistaken in the noise she had heard. She did not think so. Somebody had certainly been in that room. A window was open, and it seemed to her that she must have surprised and frightened some illicit intruder who had promptly vaulted the sill and disappeared. She took a couple of quick steps toward the window to see if the fugitive might still be in sight, but checked herself almost instantly and retreated to the door. She had distinctly seen a movement of the heavy flounce that draped the front of the big sofa and extended to the floor.

Denise Morand was an independent young woman who was quite accustomed to acting on her own initiative. It did not occur to her now to call Traynor, who was probably within hearing. She had flushed the quarry by herself and proposed to capture it single-handed.

She took the revolver from her pocket and leveled it at the flounce.

"Come out from there at once or I will shoot!"

She was not a bloodthirsty person and she had no intention at all of shooting unless she were obliged to do so in self-defense, but the remark seemed to be the correct one under the circumstances and she hoped it would prove effective.

It did. A thick-set man attired in an ill-fitting suit rolled out from underneath the sofa and sat up. He looked very hot and uncomfortable, his collar was

wilted to a pulp and the ends of his mustache hung down with an air of despondency.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" was his first rather unexpected comment. "I'm in luck. I've been wanting a word with you, Miss Morand, but I hadn't figured on meeting you just this way. Could you swing the muzzle of that sixteen-inch gun a trifle to the right or left? Perhaps you don't know that it is fearfully dangerous to point one right at a man's head."

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" The creature did not appear harmful, and Denise lowered her weapon. "How do you know my name and why do you want to speak to me?"

"My name's McCarthy, and I'm from Police Headquarters, New York City—detective branch." He threw back a corner of his coat and displayed a shield. "Theoretically I'm on leave, but I heard about this case and got interested so I'm taking my vacation on the job. I guess that's what they call a bus man's holiday, isn't it?" He grinned at her obvious bewilderment. "I saw a chance to slip into the house this morning and I've been doing a bit of snooping; then you came along and scared me under the sofa."

"But why do you want to speak to me?"

"Because I'm playing a lone hand and because I want some one on the inside who will keep me posted on what's going on. See? You are Miss Barron's attendant, are you? Uh-huh; if you'll excuse me asking, young lady, you aren't very rich, are you?"

"I'm sorry to say I'm not!"

"There must be a tidy reward for those jewels, eh?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars, according to what I've heard."

"Not so bad. Help me get it and the odd five-hundred is yours. Is that a fair proposition, Miss Morand?"

Denise's first impulse was to laugh. She checked it, looked grave for a minute, then nodded.

"I don't see why I shouldn't accept your proposal," she said. "Five hundred is always five hundred! Tell me exactly what you want me to do."

"Keep an eye on Traynor, mostly. If anybody can find those jewels, Jimmy Traynor can."

"But if he finds them how can we claim the reward?"

"Because if he finds them, he'll keep 'em! When he thinks he's safe, I step in and pinch him. Then I get the reward for recovering the goods—and promotion for nailing Jimmy."

"He—he'll *keep* them! You—you'll get promotion for arresting *Mr. Traynor!* Are you crazy or am I dreaming?"

"Hush—don't raise your voice, there's a good girl. I will tell you the facts, but I've got to make it short and snappy—this is not a healthy neighborhood for me!

"Traynor is one of the cleverest detectives and one of the cleverest thieves in the country. I pinched him once and he did three years, less something for good behavior. He has pulled several jobs lately, but he didn't leave a shred of evidence that we could act on. He has opened an office as a private detective, is pretending to go straight and is laughing at us up his sleeve. See? That's why I get promoted if I pinch him with the goods on." He made a peculiar rolling motion with his lips, seemed to miss something

and reached behind him under the sofa. His hand came back with a cold cigar, which he thrust with satisfaction into the corner of his mouth. "You watch him like a hawk, young lady, report to me whenever you can, and you'll get your five hundred when we touch the reward."

Denise stared at him, still confounded at his revelations.

"Mr. McCarthy, is all this really *true?*"

"What would be the sense of my telling you a string of lies?" There was a noise from up-stairs, and the thick-set man scrambled to his feet. He hurried to the window and looked out. "The coast is clear. It's time I was off. If you want to tell me anything at any time, hang a towel out of your window and I'll meet you down the road after dark. See?"

"Yes. Yes, I see."

The thick-set man went through the window with remarkable agility for a person of his build. He paused for a final word.

"I'd like to get the jewels and I'd like to get Jimmy; if I can get the two of them together I'll be as happy as a king. See? Ta-ta!"

He was gone. Denise stood looking at the empty window for a moment, then did a rather curious thing; she sat down on the nearest chair and began to laugh, and she laughed so hard that finally she took her handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it against her lips to muffle the sound.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### ELIMINATION

Two days passed, and although Denise Morand dutifully kept an eye on Jimmy Traynor in compliance with her promise to McCarthy she had no occasion to hang a towel from her bedroom window. Where the city man kept himself during the day or how he would know when she did give the prearranged signal, she was at first puzzled to determine, but when she looked out of the window itself and studied the topography of the terrain it commanded, she soon decided that she had found the answer. About two hundred yards away there was a moderately high wooded knoll from which anybody with a pair of glasses—or without them if his sight was exceptionally good—could easily watch the house and check the movements of its occupants without his presence being suspected. Denise did not know very much about detectives and their methods, but she had a vague notion that much of their time was passed after the simple fashion of a cat at a mouse-hole. They waited until their unsuspecting prey appeared, then pounced. She supposed McCarthy was patiently spending his days on the knoll. He must be finding it fearfully hot, and the flies of late had been abominable; Denise would have been quite sorry for him if she had not been so amused.

Jimmy Traynor himself was inclined to grieve over the vast difference between those two days and the first

forty-eight hours he had spent at Lakeside. He had arrived on the scene to be greeted by a scream, a fainting woman and the print of an alligator's claw. Then he had found the secret compartment in the desk and established to his satisfaction that Edward Grant really had had the clue to the hidden jewels. The next day had brought the discovery of the alligator skin, and right on the tail of that had come the cowardly assault upon Philip Barron. Then Jimmy had picked up the ring in the study and realized that the jewels must have been in the house only an hour or so before, and with the help of the information given him by Doctor Hendricks he had built up a really strong case against Sidney Barron. Last but not least, he had evolved a scheme that he thought would go far toward determining Sidney's innocence or guilt when the time came to put it into execution.

Yes, those forty-eight hours had been fruitful of incident and the next two days had nothing in their history to compare with them.

Not that Traynor had been idle by any manner of means. He had achieved one or two definite objects, he had done a fair amount of spade-work along strictly commonplace and orthodox detective lines and he had kept his clever brain busy analyzing every shred of evidence that he had gleaned to date. Also, though that had little to do with the question of who had the Barron jewels and where they might be, he had had two drives and one long walk with Jocelyn Keith. It might not be business but it was certainly pleasure, and if Traynor, the detective, was dissatisfied with the progress he was making, Jimmy, the man, had no fault to find.

When he had sketched for Geoffrey's benefit an imaginary picture of his father's assailant, Traynor had depicted a man who knew about the jewels, who knew the personnel of the establishment and who had undoubtedly accounted for the whereabouts of them all before he stole in on his deadly errand. Also, if Traynor's rough theory covered the facts, this man had shot Philip in cold blood lest he be recognized.

Sidney Barron answered to the description perfectly, but there was still another who filled in the bill as neatly. Jimmy noted the fact, and the very morning after he had painted the imaginary portrait he went out to have a chat with George Hart, the handy man. George might be—and probably was—as innocent of the crimes as an unborn babe, but since he possessed all the qualifications of Traynor's hypothetical ruffian it was only fair that he should be given his place in the list of suspects. One more specimen must be put on the glass slide and examined beneath the microscope of impartial investigation.

The detective found him picking ears of corn for the cook, and in response to his cheerful, "Good morning," the man glanced up and returned a civil greeting. Then he put down the basket he was carrying, filled and lighted a pipe, malodorous but satisfying, and instead of waiting to be questioned, proceeded to question Jimmy.

"Can you give me any news of Mr. Barron, sir?"

"The doctor telephoned this morning as usual. Mr. Barron is holding his own and will recover—if nothing happens."

"That's about the best you can get out of any doctor," said George gravely. "Excuse me, sir, but you're a detective, ain't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"There's a good bit of talk going around the village about you; I don't say anything myself, but of course I listen."

"A splendid system."

"I've heard it said that Mr. Barron's accident wasn't —an accident."

"Somebody made a good guess, Hart, for there is no way that the truth could have leaked out."

"The truth?" The gardener took his pipe from his mouth and looked fixedly at the detective. "It's true, then? Somebody got into the house and shot him?"

"It seems certain that was what happened."

"Who was it, sir?"

"Well, George, he didn't leave his visiting-card. Give me time and I may be able to answer your question. Meanwhile, I'm curious to know how he got into the house, fooled around for at least fifteen minutes, and got out again without anybody seeing him. Miss Keith and I were walking by the river, Miss Morand and the cook had gone to Tarryville, but—where were *you?* How was it that you didn't see him, or hear the revolver shot?"

"That's easy, sir. It was my afternoon off and I had gone to Weyburn. The boys had fixed up a checker tournament in the back room of Barney's Restaurant with a bottle of real old rye for a prize." A dreamy expression of satisfaction flitted across Mr. Hart's plain but honest countenance. "I won it, sir, and I didn't turn up here until the next morning."

Traynor flattered himself that he knew a good alibi when he heard one. This, he thought, was a pippin. He accepted it unreservedly, and unless he could induce Jocelyn to drive him over, when he would go for

the sake of the drive, he would not bother to visit Barney's Restaurant in Weyburn for confirmation. He congratulated the champion on his prowess and abruptly changed the subject.

"Hart, hasn't Mr. Barron got a brother who lives around here somewhere?"

"Uh-huh. That's Sidney Barron."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, sir." The man's face darkened a trifle. "Yes, sir, I know him. Used to work for him 'bout ten years ago."

"You don't sound as if you liked him very well."

"I don't know any one as does—unless it's that breed he's got doing chores for him now. I won't deny that he fired me, but I was good and ready to quit. A mean-tempered devil if ever there was one. I was there one day when a stray cat came to the back door crying for food, and Sidney Barron came along with an ax in his hand and cut the poor critter clean in two."

"May it scratch his eyes out through all eternity!" cried the detective. "I take it, then, Hart, that if I should want to play a bit of a trick on Sidney Barron you'd be willing to help me—and keep your mouth shut?"

"I would indeed, sir. And if you're thinking of poisoning him," continued the handy man earnestly, "I've got some splendid stuff for rats that I've been using around the chicken-run——"

"Thank you," said the detective hastily. "I'll bear your suggestion in mind, but for the moment I think we'll stop short of poison!"

Nevertheless, it was as a result of this casual interview with George Hart—whose name was now stricken from the suspect list—and of certain arrangements

made by Traynor, that a seedy, unkempt individual mounted the front steps of Sidney Barron's house two days later, crossed the rickety wooden porch and knocked diffidently on the door. It was opened immediately—so promptly indeed that even a very amateurish detective might have guessed that the visitor had been expected and his approach observed.

It was Sidney Barron himself who opened the door.

"Well? Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Name's Grant, sir," said the caller in an ingratiating whine. "From Chicago, sir. I took the liberty of writing you, sir——"

"Got it this morning."

"I started after it, sir, just as quick as I could raise the fare. No one can say of Johnny Grant that when there was business to be done he ever let a blade of grass grow beneath his feet——"

"What business? What do you want?"

The seedy one looked about him, then coughed deprecatingly.

"Could we go inside, sir? I've walked from the station, sir, and if you happen to have a bottle of beer or a drop of whisky——"

"Come in!" grunted Sidney Barron contemptuously. He led the way to a musty, gloomy sitting-room, vanished for a few minutes and came back with a bottle of beer and a glass. "There you are. Now tell me what you want and make it sharp. If it's blackmail, you've come to the wrong address."

"Blackmail! Oh, no, sir! No Grant would ever stoop to——"

"Come to the point!" barked Sidney.

"Yes, sir. I wrote you I'd something to talk with you about, sir, because I knew you knew my brother,

Ned. Edward was his real name, of course, but we always used to call him Ned——"

"What in blazes do I care what you called him! As for my knowing him, he was my brother's butler and I may have seen the man once of twice. Go on."

"Oh, Mr. Barron, sir, you shouldn't talk like that." The seedy individual had finished the bottle of beer, and as if it had given him courage, he ventured on a knowing wink. "Ned—you don't mind if I call him that, sir?—Ned was always one to keep his family informed of what he was doing. He wrote me all about you, sir, and how kind you'd been to him and how you'd promised him something handsome if he found those jewels——"

"If you're trying to blackmail me——!"

"Indeed, sir, I'm not. I won't say I'm being strictly straight, sir. If I was, I'd go direct to Mr. Philip Barron, but I'm a poor man and business is business. I just thought from Ned's letters that you'd be a bit more generous, sir, that's all, so I came to you."

"Generous about what?" Sidney Barron leaned forward in his chair and regarded his caller attentively. "About what—eh?"

"The jewels, sir. He found them."

*"He—found—them!"* Barron's voice was scarcely more than a husky whisper. "Where are they, then? How do you know he found them?"

"Your brother, sir, expressed his belongings to us in Chicago. He never guessed there was a false bottom to the trunk, but I knew about it and I opened it. They were in it, sir—a handsome collection they are!"

"Why didn't he bring them to me at once?"

"Er—you'll excuse me, sir"—the seedy man coughed again—"I think Ned was a business man, too. He was

going to offer them to the highest bidder, but just at the wrong time his heart went back on him. If Mr. Philip Barron had only thought to search that trunk——"

"Curse Mr. Philip Barron! Where are they? Show me!"

"Oh, indeed, sir, I haven't got them with me!" A cunning leer twisted the caller's lips. "I'm too wise a bird for that, sir, but they're in a perfectly safe place. Shall I go on, sir?"

"Yes." Sidney Barron licked his dry lips. "Go on."

"Mr. Philip discovered that they'd been stolen and he hired a detective——"

"I know all that!"

"Yes, sir. I made inquiries—very discreet, through a friend, sir—and I understand Mr. Philip has offered a thousand dollars reward for their return. Of course he can't hold me responsible for what poor Ned did, and I've only to walk up as bold as brass and get that thousand. But I thought I'd give you a chance, sir, because I knew from poor Ned that you were liberal and open-handed, sir. If you could see your way to offering something more, sir,—say, five thousand——?"

"Don't be a fool!" Sidney Barron's eyes were covetous, greedy, but he bargained automatically. "Bring them here and I'll give you just two thousand dollars. That's twice what you'll get from Philip."

"Two thousand! With the cost of living what it is! You might throw in the fare from Chicago and back, sir, and something for my time——"

"Two thousand two hundred. Take it or leave it!"

"I'll take it, sir. Next Tuesday at six, sir—on your front porch. I'm not fool enough to try to sell them myself, and two thousand clear will just——"

"Get out!" said Sidney Barron, trying hard to conceal the light of elation that blazed in his eyes. "Get out, and don't come back unless you bring those jewels." A cunning gleam supplanted the expression of triumph. "Mind you, I've got an inventory of them! Don't think any of them can stick to your fingers!"

"Oh, sir, the Grants have always been honest!" The seedy individual got up, ducked his head politely and shuffled to the front door. "Good day, sir—and thank you for helping a poor man."

Twenty minutes later the poor man stole softly into Philip Barron's house and commenced a cautious ascent of the front stairs. He reached the second floor safely, but as he turned down the hall he was confronted by a cool, dark-haired young woman who was attired in something blue with a pocket. The pocket had been emptied for the nonce and its contents were pointed accurately at his head. The poor man threw up his hands with celerity and dispatch.

"Don't shoot!" he said. "I'm not an alligator."

"Mr. Traynor!"

"The same—caught being a regular detective in disguise! Do you recognize George Hart's Sunday suit?"

"What *have* you been doing?"

"Come into the study and I'll tell you. By the way, let me pat a good watch-dog on the head! I didn't think I made a sound coming up-stairs."

"My hearing is rather good." Denise turned and went to the study. "There are a couple of letters for you, and I put them on the desk. Was that all right?"

"Of course. Sit down, and forgive me if I glance at them. They may be important."

She sat down and studied his face gravely while he read the two letters. One was from the detective

agency in New York; they had carefully questioned every theatrical costumer in the city and had found none who remembered such a fancy-dress rig as Mr. Traynor had described. If they could be of further use, etc. The second letter was more interesting. It was from the finger-print expert and contained photographs of some very clear prints which had been found on the butt of the revolver he had sent. As he would see, the fingers that made them must have been broad and stubby, suggesting the toil-worn hand of a workman. He would notice the scar on the ball of the thumb . . .

Traynor obediently noticed the scar on the ball of the thumb-print. A help, yes, if he could now find the scarred thumb which had made it. He put the letters in his pocket rather gloomily.

"Bad news?" asked Denise.

"Not altogether. One miss and one hit—not a bad average. Where is Miss Keith?"

"Getting supplies in the village."

"Oh. I only asked because I want her to hear the same story I'm about to tell you. There is one thing I like to do—and always do—in any case, and that is to exonerate from suspicion any one who has been unjustly suspected."

"I understand. That is very fair. Otherwise people might go right on suspecting him until the real truth was known. Who have you exonerated, Mr. Traynor?"

"A man you had doubts of, Miss Morand, which is why I'm willing to tell you what I've been doing. Sidney Barron is eliminated from the crowd of suspects."

"Sidney Barron!" The girl's lips parted in surprise. "Is it possible! I was sure——"

"I was pretty sure myself, if it comes to that," ad-

mitted Traynor ruefully. "I won't conceal from you that Sidney's innocence is a grievous blow to me. However, harken to my adventures! I preserved a decent reticence the other day when you wanted to know why I hadn't taken some decisive action against him, but as a matter of fact I had already sent an air-mail letter to Chicago that was to be posted to him from there. It purported to come from Edward Grant's brother, Johnny, and it got me my entrée to Sidney's disagreeable presence."

She listened in silence to his half-humorous account of the interview with Philip's brother.

"He wasn't acting, Miss Morand. I'm too good a judge to be mistaken there! I wish you had seen the miserly light in his eyes when he thought he had the jewels almost in his grasp! There was nothing faked about it—he never smelled a rat or suspected a trap. He believed what I told him—and consequently I am perfectly satisfied that Sidney hasn't got the jewels already and that he had nothing to do with the assault on his brother!"

"It was a clever little scheme," said Denise, "and I wouldn't dream of questioning his innocence if you believe in it." She leaned back in her chair and knitted her brows as she eyed him reflectively. "In that case, where are we left?"

"About where we started!" said Traynor crossly. "All our best ponies are scratched!"

That seemed to be Miss Morand's conviction, too. After the exchange of a few desultory remarks, she excused herself and went to her room. She stood for a minute in the center of it, pensive, then took a towel from her wash-stand and hung it out the window.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DAB OF GREASE-PAINT

"Well, that's very interesting," said McCarthy that evening, when Denise had finished her report. "So brother Sidney is out of the running, eh?"

She had found the police officer waiting for her down the road, after she had pleaded the desire for exercise as an excuse for quitting the house, and he had led her to a wood retreat not very far from the spot where the unfortunate Grant had kept his rendezvous with his second master. McCarthy had welcomed her appearance heartily, and the first thing he insisted upon was the complete history of the case to date so far as she knew it. He could hardly have appealed to a better person, for thanks to what Philip had told her and to what Traynor had confided to her, as well as to the things she had seen and heard and learned for herself, she was splendidly equipped to give him quite a comprehensive and accurate account of all that had happened since the death of the butler.

McCarthy had had at best a superficial knowledge of the facts concerning the disappearance of the Barron jewels, and while those facts, together with the presence of Jimmy Traynor on the scene, were enough to excite his liveliest interest they were hardly enough to justify his doing much theorizing or deducing himself. He was glad now to receive the inside detailed story told by a clever young woman in clear concise fashion.

The strange tale of the alligator sketches flatly mystified McCarthy, though he was able to give a deep and appreciative chuckle over the last and most impertinent of the lot, the discovery of which had been grinningly reported to Denise by Geoffrey, who thought the joke too good to keep.

"I've never known the beat of this case," commented the city detective. "It's more like the stuff you read than anything you'd meet up with in real life."

"What do you think of it yourself, Mr. McCarthy? You must have had a great deal of experience."

"So I have, miss, so I have, but no two criminal problems ever have quite the same answer. If I'd been handling this Barron jewel affair I'd have got after this Sidney feller, and if he hadn't been able to account for his whereabouts at the time Philip was shot I'd have put him under lock and key and got a search-warrant to go over his house. I don't say it would have come to much, because he could have hidden the jewels in forty other places, but that is what I'd have done."

"Mr. Traynor got the same result a little more simply, it seems to me," said Denise thoughtfully.

"So he did, miss. He's as sharp as they make 'em, is Jimmy Traynor, and if he says Sidney is innocent, I guess Sidney is. That was a cute notion, passing himself off as Grant's brother. I'm not too proud to take a leaf from another man's book and I'll remember that stunt against the time I can use it meself."

"But who took the jewels?" demanded Denise impatiently. "And where are they now?"

"I'm free to confess, miss, that I'm prejudiced in anything that concerns jewels and Jimmy. If there's

a jewel missing and Jimmy is in the same county, my opinion will always be that Jimmy has the jewel. It may sound wrong, but you'd be surprised how often it would be right."

"But what has that to do with this business?"

"He found a ring in the study after Barron was shot?"

"Yes. That's true. I've seen it."

"Uh-huh. Well, suppose he found all the rest of the jewels, too. Suppose he hid 'em, showing that one just as a sort of proof that they had been in the study and must have been stolen a second time. Suppose he keeps on pretending to work on the case, exonerating everybody as he exonerated Geoffrey and George Hart and Sidney Barron, until he finally chucks up his hands and puts a sad look on that pleasant face of his and says he's sorry but he's beaten. Who's to contradict him? Who's going to suspect him—outside the police? He goes off with the loot and bunks it somewhere safe, and it may be ten years before he takes it out again and hocks it. See?"

When McCarthy suggested that Jimmy might have found all the jewelry in the study, he heard a little gasp from the girl sitting beside him in the dark. That she didn't listen very carefully to the rest of his argument was manifest from the question she put to him in a low voice as he ended.

"Oh, do you think he *did* find them there? *Do* you? I still can't imagine Mr. Traynor a—a thief!"

"Humph. I've done all I can to convince you short of bringing you his official record that's on file in Headquarters. Didn't I tell you that I arrested him meself and that he did three years?"

"But that was long ago. You told me also that he opened a new office and is pretending to go straight. Mightn't he——"

"Pretending is the word, miss," interrupted McCarthy firmly. "Take it from yours truly, our Jimmy is the best little pretender the world has seen since the late Bonnie Prince Charlie. He never overlooks a bet, either. What do you think he did when he opened that new office you mention? An ordinary crook just out of jail would have tried to conceal his identity, wouldn't he? But not Traynor! No, sir, he hung out his shingle as bold as brass with his own name on it."

"But I think that's rather admirable!"

"Exactly what he figured you'd think, or any one else in the know!" declared her companion triumphantly. "When he set up business again he came to two conclusions, and both of 'em do credit to his brains, if you ask me. The first was that he couldn't lose himself from the police no matter what alias he took; the second was that the public has a short memory and wouldn't recall the name of an obscure crook who had been sent up the river three years before for burglary. Get it?"

"Yes. He's clever," said Denise slowly.

"I'll say so! Now, if anybody *should* happen along and throw his past in his face he has only to mention sadly that a man has a right to live such things down if he can, and point to his doing it under his own name as a proof of his courage and candor!" The city officer laughed, not unkindly. "He's a great Jimmy, and there are no flies on him! We more than suspect he is guilty of a job pulled recently on Long Island, but we can't come within miles of proving it. Lots of crooks

stay crooked, and I know Jimmy Traynor is one of 'em—when he isn't being a smart detective!"

"I—I suppose you must be right."

"Sure, I'm right! It would take a fine piece of conclusive proof to convince me that I'm wrong! Not that I'd be sorry to get it, either, for I've always liked Jimmy—outside of office hours."

"You know him well?"

"Pretty well. I've seen him a number of times since he came back from doing his stretch. He's sensible, is Jimmy, and he knows I was only doing my duty in pinching him and he doesn't bear me any grudge. He even gave me a tip once that helped me a lot on a case that had me up a tree." McCarthy was silent a moment, then rendered handsome tribute to his official enemy. "He has his faults, miss, and he's certainly a menace to society, but he plays square with his friends and if I were in any sort of trouble I'd sooner go to Jimmy than to a bishop! See?"

"I think I understand," said the girl slowly. She had thought quite a bit about Jimmy Traynor since the other day when this man had enlightened her in respect to the detective's past, and she had decided that his personality, with its sharply contrasted characteristics, was easily the most fascinating and colorful she had ever encountered. A gentleman without, a scoundrel within! A crook and an ex-convict, yet here was the police officer who had arrested him paying him no ordinary compliment! To mark her appreciation of his tribute, she held out a friendly hand to McCarthy as she rose from the rock upon which they had been sitting. "Well, I must be going along or they'll have a search party after me. What do I do next? Keep

on watching Mr. Traynor? Shall I hunt through his belongings some time and see if the jewels——?"

"No, no! Too risky. He'd never hide them so carelessly as that, and besides you'd be sure to disturb something and he'd notice it like a shot with those sharp eyes of his. Then it would be good-by jewels and good-by reward! Just go on watching him—and hang out the towel if you learn anything new. Good night, miss."

While Denise and McCarthy were up a side road discussing him, Jimmy Traynor passed abreast of them on the main highway, his destination the telegraph office in the station at Tarryville. His ears did not burn, and he never dreamed that his character was being dissected within thirty yards of him, as he swung briskly by the spot where the secondary road branched off.

He had been doing a great deal of hard thinking since his short chat with Denise, and the majority of his reflections centered about the letter he had received from Pierce and Cobden, the New York private detective agency whose services he had retained temporarily.

It was a great disappointment to him that they had failed to locate the theatrical costumer who had made the alligator skin outfit. Traynor had felt confident that such an elaborate and beautifully made affair could have come only from one of the best work-shops in the country, and since the disguise had been used in the East he had taken it for granted that New York City was in all probability its birthplace. Besides, he had guessed the secret of the alligator and had written to Pierce and Cobden actually before his discovery of

the skin had verified his surmise, so it would have been a great feather in his cap if the man who made the costume had been located and had been able to name or describe the person who had commanded such a unique bathing-suit.

In the light of the detectives' failure to achieve this desirable result, Traynor could see now where he had taken too much for granted in the first place. His aunt, he told himself, would have said that he had been thinking more of Jocelyn than of the case he was investigating, and of course she would have been right, as she usually was.

He should have realized that nobody could have brought the alligator disguise to Tarryville with the premeditated intention of using it to frighten the butler to death at the very moment when he was reading the paper that contained the clue to the secret hiding-place in the kitchen wall. How under the sun the thief, disguised in such extraordinary fashion, had turned up in the critical spot at the critical instant was yet as much of a mystery to Traynor as the Einstein theory. Second only to it was the question of how he managed to slip in and out of the house apparently at will, leaving his confounded sketches behind him to jeer at his pursuers.

Jimmy was forced to realize now that the presence of the alligator skin in Tarryville must have been a fortuitous coincidence, and that its owner might have brought it from any part of America, Europe or Asia. He had simply wasted his time and some of Philip's money in scouring New York for its maker.

It was while pondering these disagreeable truths that he remembered something which had briefly

escaped his attention. When he was rolling up the skin in order to replace it in the locker, his fingers had been slightly stained by a substance which he recognized as grease-paint. When the incident occurred he was still nursing the delusion that Pierce and Cobden would shortly produce the manufacturer's name, and he had not given the paint a second thought. But the memory of it was stored in the back of his brain and obligingly popped up when he began to concentrate on this particular one of his many problems.

Grease-paint? That suggested the stage at once. But Jimmy was very fond of the theater and spent many evenings at the play, and he did not think that he could have missed the fact if there had ever been a piece in which an alligator had appeared.

Amateur theatricals? There was an outside chance that they were his answer, but he did not think it likely that such an elaborate and expensive costume could have been devised for amateur theatricals, which usually are staged just once.

Vaudeville? Ah! Why hadn't he thought of that before!

He was so delighted with the new prospect that he seized his hat and left the house immediately in order to dispatch a night-letter to Pierce and Cobden. He was fortunate in catching the operator still on duty, and hastily scribbled his message.

"Try vaudeville booking-agents. Inquire if any act employing such costume is known to them. Advise me by wire if successful."

He signed it and handed it to the man behind the

grille, then walked home feeling more complacent than he had for two long days.

He was sitting in Philip's study the following morning at eleven o'clock, his notebook, the photographs of the finger-prints and the various sketches of the alligator spread before him on the desk in order to stimulate his brain, when he heard Jocelyn's clear voice down-stairs talking to somebody who responded in a lower key and in a tone of respect. Jimmy would have liked to go down and join in the conversation, whatever it might be, but at this hour of the morning Miss Keith was occupied of necessity with the housework, and he had learned by experience that she did not welcome his company while thus menially engaged. Even his offer to help make beds had been coldly rejected.

So he went on puzzling over his notes and his evidence, and about twenty minutes later his virtue was rewarded. Jocelyn came to the study, greeted him cheerfully and threw herself into a chair.

"You seem pleased about something, Miss Keith."

"Indeed I am! What do you think has happened! Byland's—the domestic employment agency, you know—has actually sent me a girl to be housemaid and waitress! Isn't that luck? She's a nice creature, and she's willing to stay in the country because the city does not agree with her health. Hallelujah!"

"I congratulate you heartily. What is her name? What is she like?"

"She's young—quite pretty—pink and white, and yellow hair that has been bobbed. Her name, if you please, is Gwendolynne—two *n*'s and an *e!*"

"It might have been Godiva or Guinevere. Gwendolynne what?"

"Perkins. I suppose you'll want to go and examine her references! They seem all right—and if you find anything wrong with her I will never forgive you!"

"I can quite believe it, and I think I'll leave her alone! When does she take over her new job?"

"At once. Incidentally I must leave you and go and see that Grant's room is in order. Servants are queer!"

"Yes? Why?"

"Well, we've always put the cook and the housemaid in the same room—it's a lovely big one with two comfortable beds. None of them has ever objected until now!"

Jimmy's face was suddenly crimson.

"Yes—and now?"

"This Gwendolynne person is too haughty to sleep with the cook! She must have a room of her own! She was lovely about everything else—agreed to all our little ways and habits—and then got actually wild because I told her she would be expected to share the same room with Tillie!" Jocelyn rose, shaking her head over the vagaries of domestics. "Would you like to have a look at her now—or will you wait until you see her at lunch?"

"I can hold out until lunch, thanks."

Miss Keith departed. Left to himself, Jimmy Traynor gave way to certain entertaining thoughts and no longer tried to conceal his emotion. He put his head down on his arms and laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

## CHAPTER XX

### PHANTOM FOOTFALLS

If the last two days had been quiet, the next two were as peaceful as Lakeside had ever seen. Reports from the hospital indicated that Philip was more than holding his own, that his recovery was assured, that he was gaining strength every day, and Jimmy began to hope that in a week at most he would be permitted to visit him and ask one or two leading questions. He doubted if the old gentleman could tell him who had done the shooting, since it had been done from behind, but he could at least clear up the mystery of how the jewels happened to be in the study at the time of his "accident."

Nothing worthy of note occurred in the house itself during those two days. Miss Landry, posing as Tillie Brown, the cook, kept her ears and her notebook wide open to no purpose. Denise watched Traynor, as she had promised to do, and there was an expression of cynical amusement about her lips as she discovered that keeping Jimmy under observation meant also observing Jocelyn. The pair of them were always together, but Denise did not feel that the fact warranted her hanging out a towel from her window. She did not believe such a prosaic individual as McCarthy would take any interest in a budding romance, and anyway he could see from his coign of vantage that Jimmy and Jocelyn fared forth repeatedly for drives and walks.

Jocelyn declared herself emancipated and evidently rejoiced exceedingly in her new freedom. She detested housework, she said, and the few days between the departure of the old servants and the coming of the new had been the most tiresome she had ever spent. Thank goodness, Tillie was a splendid cook and a perfect treasure, and the waitress, in spite of her ridiculous name, was willing and quick to learn even if her previous training had been curiously deficient in some respects. She seemed to get on well with the cook, too, which was a comfort.

"You're quite right," agreed the detective, to whom Miss Keith was confiding these matters after breakfast on the morning of the third day. "If I ever write a book of household proverbs I shall note that a staff divided against itself is but a broken reed. I was a little afraid at first that Tillie might nurse a grudge against Gwendolynne for the way she acted about having separate rooms."

"No, that appears to have blown over." Jocelyn strolled to the window and glanced out. "It's a gorgeous morning—cool, and not a cloud in the sky. Do you play tennis?"

"No. I wish I did."

"A friend of mine called up last evening and persuaded me to make a fourth this morning at the club. I'm going to walk over; do you feel like escorting me as far as the gate of the club-grounds? Just to keep the alligators off! It's not very far."

"Nothing I'd like better," declared Traynor with alacrity. "A walk will do me good before I sit down to my daily chore of trying to puzzle out this case while waiting for things to happen."

"Will anything happen?" asked Jocelyn rather skeptically. "Of course I'm not a detective, but I don't see how you or anybody can trace those jewels."

She would have been much surprised if she had known that something quite exciting was due to happen as a result of that innocent conversation and her invitation to the detective to accompany her. Great oaks from little acorns grow.

The acorns on the occasion were Jocelyn's casualness and Traynor's carelessness. That was a fault of which he was rarely guilty, and his Aunt Matilda subsequently read him an unusually sharp lecture on the same old theme of mixing business with pleasure.

Denise had sought and obtained Jocelyn's ready permission to take the car and do a number of small errands for herself in Weyburn, and Jocelyn promised with equal readiness to keep an eye on Lydia Barron while Miss Morand was gone. But when she made that easy promise she had forgotten her tennis engagement, and when she finally remembered the tennis, she promptly forgot the promise. She did, however, recall some marketing that must be done, and stepping back into the kitchen, she dispatched Gwendolynne Perkins to Tarryville to do it.

"All right," she said cheerfully as she returned to Jimmy. "Get your hat and come on. I'll be late as it is."

Traynor obediently took his hat from the rack in the hall and came on. He did not know that Denise had gone to Weyburn nor that the bobbed-haired Gwendolynne was on her way to market, and his carelessness lay in his taking it for granted that they were occupied only with their usual duties. He should have made cer-

tain of this before blithely departing with Jocelyn for a walk, but as it was he never even suspected that they were leaving the house empty except for Matilda Landry in the kitchen and Lydia Barron in her room above.

Miss Landry, whose wits were clouded by no soft dreams of romance, grasped the fact at once. She had seen Denise go, and Gwendolynne, and from a side window of her kitchen that chanced to command a view of the highway she caught a glimpse of Jimmy and Jocelyn vanishing into the distance. She sent a look after her nephew that would have killed if it had carried.

"Moron!" she muttered. "After all this talk about not leaving the house unprotected! Serve him jolly well right if I kidnaped George Hart and took him for a stroll, too!"

George Hart came to her mind because she had seen him a few minutes since working among the tomato vines, and though she was not at all a nervous woman, she was glad to think that he was there. In the event of anything happening, and things certainly did seem to happen in this creaky old house, she would not be entirely alone. Fire, for instance! Suppose that crippled creature up-stairs should get to playing with matches! Who would carry her out, and who would extinguish the flames?

With the help of Gwendolynne Perkins she had made quick work of the breakfast dishes. They were out of the way, thank goodness, and she had a clear hour in which to sit down and rest before starting to prepare lunch. She armed herself with a cook-book—it was Miss Landry's favorite brand of literature, and this particular volume was entirely new to her—kicked

off her shoes, put a cushion behind her back and settled herself comfortably in a rocker. She mastered a recipe for corn-bread that sounded as if it might be worthy of trial, and then, since the print was rather fine, she closed her eyes to rest them. Presently, unconsciousness came.

What awakened her she could not tell for a moment. A glance at her kitchen clock told her that her nap had not lasted more than five or ten minutes. She had a vague feeling that she had heard some noise, but all was still now. Had she dreamed it?

While she was asking herself the question, it was answered for her. From overhead came the sound of a stealthy step—stealthy, but for all that the step of a heavy person, as Miss Landry could tell from the vibration of the old flooring above. She listened carefully, and at last she was able to determine that whoever was walking about up-stairs was not moving around casually but was pacing back and forth. Eight steps one way, pause for a turn, eight steps the opposite way, pause for another turn.

"Queer!" commented Miss Landry.

She sat very still and half shut her eyes as she tried to remember the plan of the second floor, especially in relation to the kitchen in which she sat. She occupied a room herself in the same ell as Denise Morand, and since she used the back stairs entirely she had never seen the rooms directly above the kitchen. She might not have been able to decide what they were if the memory of a casual remark of Jimmy's had not come to her aid just then. He had mentioned once that Philip's study was over the kitchen and that the study was just across the hall from Lydia Barron's room.

The study and the sick-room!

Who could be pacing in either of them? Miss Landry felt sure it was a man's step from its weight and sound, but Geoffrey Barron was in the city as usual and her nephew did not walk like that. A little shiver ran up her spine and seemed to crisp the roots of her black hair. She did not trust anything about this old house that could not be explained. Was it the "alligator" perhaps, returned to the scene of his crimes?

"I'm a fool!" said Miss Landry crossly. "He has nothing to come back for!"

Then she heard something that she had not expected to hear at all. It was a voice from above—a deep rumbling voice that talked at least a full minute before it ceased. When it stopped, the footsteps also paused. Another voice, lighter and higher in tone, responded to the first. Silence. The pacing was resumed. The deep voice rumbled again, and after an interval the other answered.

"Two of them!" whispered Matilda Landry. *"Two!"*

She rose cautiously from her chair and tiptoed toward the kitchen door that gave on the garden, sparing a grateful thought for the happy chance that her shoes were off and her stockinged feet made no sound on the oak planking of the floor.

Her duty lay clear before her, and though the idea of what she proposed to do fairly curdled her blood, she did not dream of shirking the task. She must try to learn who was talking up-stairs, and if possible she must catch enough of the conversation to gather its subject. But for the moment her intention was to summon George Hart and to instruct him in a whisper

to stand by for possible trouble while she stole quietly up the front stairs. George might think her crazy, or might think what he chose, but she was too good a general to leave her lines of communication unprotected in her rear! If she had to retreat suddenly, she wished to be able to fall back upon her reserves.

Unfortunately, when she stuck her head out the back door her reserves were not to be seen. George Hart had vanished from the tomato patch, and though she sought him far and wide with anxious eyes she could discern no sign of him. Her heart dropped a beat.

"If I fool around here all morning they'll be *gone,* and I may never have another chance to catch them!" she muttered. "There's no help for it—I've got to chance it alone!"

She did not give her perfectly excusable fears time to argue with that courageous resolve. She left the back door wide open in case she might wish presently to exit by it in some haste, armed herself with a big rolling-pin, crossed the kitchen swiftly and silently and gained the front of the house by way of the long main hall.

The voices were louder, now, but the words were still indistinguishable. Matilda Landry took a deep breath, said a silent prayer and took several stealthy steps up the front stairs. She put her feet as close to the baseboard as possible, having heard at some time that treads are less likely to creak if that method is pursued, and she found to her satisfaction that the theory seemed true. She had got half-way up before her luck deserted her and the board upon which she had just stepped gave a loud crack.

By that time, however, she had solved the first part

of her problem; she had reached a point sufficiently high to enable her to look down the length of the upper hall, and she could now determine that the voices were coming, not from the study, but from the sick-room! Her spine reacted to another shiver. Who could be talking like that to a mentally incompetent woman, and what could they be talking about?

With the creaking of the board, the voices ceased instantly. There was the sound of a soft thud, much as if somebody were shutting a heavy door cautiously. There were no longer any footsteps.

"He's afraid of me!" whispered Miss Landry to herself. "He is probably more afraid of me than I am of him!"

She summoned all her resolution, took a firm grip on the handle of her rolling-pin and completed the ascent of the stairs without troubling further to tread lightly. She hesitated only a fraction of a second at the landing to glance back over her shoulder, just to make sure that the stairs were clear and the front door open, then advanced boldly toward the room from which the voices had come. She was going to look in come what might, and if she saw anything too terrible or threatening she would bolt for the stairs and scurry down them for dear life.

The next moment she paused on the threshold of the sick-room, staring into it.

Before her, in the center of the apartment, was the wheel-chair with its incumbent. Lydia Barron was looking straight at her, an expression almost of ferocity in her pale blue eyes. Her deep voice boomed a prompt challenge.

"Who are you, old woman? Go 'way!" Her heavy

lips wore a snarl, and her nose wrinkled very much as a wild animal's does under anger or excitement. "Go 'way! I don't like your face!"

"You poor creature, I certainly don't like yours," said Matilda Landry to herself. Then she spoke aloud, remembering to cup her ear. "Excuse me, ma'am, did I hear you call? I thought I did, but my hearin' 's none too good."

"Go *'way!*" cried the invalid.

Her first glance around the room had shown Miss Landry that it was apparently empty save for the invalid, but she did not have time to be surprised at that before she noticed a closet in the farther wall, its door shut. She remembered the noise she had heard that resembled the cautious shutting of a door. Nothing could be more obvious than that Lydia Barron's visitor, whoever he might be and whatever he had come for, was hiding in the closet. Hiding!

Miss Landry recalled her nephew's theory that Philip had been shot, not of necessity, but because his would-be assassin had feared recognition. Was this the same man, and was he hiding lest she recognize him? She found the possibility altogether too probable for comfort; if it were indeed the man and she were to surprise him in his retreat, he would certainly do his best to kill her!

She was a brave woman, as she had demonstrated by her trip up-stairs, but she was neither foolhardy nor stupid. She would not have crossed the room and opened that closet door for fifty thousand dollars, and it would be hard to say that her reluctance was not justifiable. If she played her cards carefully she was now in a fair way to get a piece of important informa-

tion for her nephew, whereas it would not help him at all if he were to return presently to find himself confronted with a murder mystery in which his aunt was cast in the rôle of victim.

These thoughts passed through her brain with the rapidity of light-waves, and seemed indeed to illumine her course. She shook her gray head pityingly at the woman in the chair, then backed out of the room and down the hall and half-way down the front stairs. When she had reached the lowest point from which she could still see the door of the sick-room, she knelt in an attitude of prayer, her eyes fixed stonily on the door and her stockinged feet thrust out behind her. So she settled herself to wait for what might happen, and so Jimmy Traynor found her when he returned from his walk and entered the front hall.

He was at her side in two bounds, more frightened than he had been for years, for he thought from her attitude that she must either be very ill or the victim of an accident. His relief was enormous when she turned her head and greeted him; then she scrambled to her feet and gave him a look that chilled him to the bone.

"Jimmy Traynor," she said severely, "I'd give a lot of money if I could turn you across my knee and give you what you deserve. As it is, just listen to what I've got to tell you."

Quickly and tersely she described her experience; Jimmy listened in astonished silence, but as she finished he reached back and transferred something from his hip to the side-pocket of his coat. His hand rested therein as he started up the stairs.

"Go down by the front door. If anything happens

to me, wave to the first auto that passes and send them for the police."

He ran lightly and swiftly up the remainder of the stairs and strode into the sick-room without ceremony. He paid no heed to Lydia Barron's sharp outburst, he did not even spare her a glance, as he crossed the room and went straight to the closet. It was the only one in the room, and it occurred to him that this must be the nook where Penobscot's wife had hanged herself! Cheery spot! His right hand still remained in his coat pocket, so he seized the knob with his left, turned it and flung the door open, stepping back as he did so in case some one should leap at him from the recess.

The closet was empty. Not even a ghost leaped out!

Jimmy took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. He had been so confident that he would find a very competent and unscrupulous crook in the closet that the reaction was startling. He drew a long breath and expelled it in a soft whistle. For the first time he took note of Lydia Barron's restless complaints.

"All right," he said shortly. "Yes, I know you think I'm a bad man! Yes, I'm going!"

Once across the threshold he called down to his aunt who was standing obediently near the front door.

"You were wrong, Tillie. There is no one here. You must have dreamed it!"

"Just as you say, sir," replied Miss Landry, quick to take the cue. "I was certainly asleep, sir, and I guess you must be right."

"Not that you are," she added as her nephew came down and joined her. "I wasn't mistaken."

"I only said that to put him off his guard if he's

within hearing, but I'm afraid he has shown us a clean pair of heels," said Traynor gloomily. "Come outdoors a minute."

"What for?" asked Miss Landry, but she followed him willingly enough as he led the way around the house to a point beneath Lydia Barron's window. "It's rather nice to find myself out in the world again. Half an hour ago I didn't think I ever would be!"

Beneath Miss Barron's window, which was open, was a sloping wooden door that covered a flight of steps leading to the cellar. Jimmy looked from the window to the trap, measuring the distance with his eye; it was certainly not too far for a desperate man to drop. He saw by the expression on his aunt's face that she was reading his thoughts.

"We don't seem to have any luck," he said disgustedly. "Why does this fool door have to be in just this spot? If there had only been turf we might have found the imprint of his feet where he landed and been sure of our facts."

"Still, he *must* have come this way!"

"Maybe so, aunty, but it wouldn't surprise me a bit if the next thing to turn up in this case were to be a secret stairway! We've had nearly everything else."

"Mmph! It's more sensible to suppose that he jumped the moment he heard me coming up-stairs; I told you I heard a thump like somebody shutting a door. If he had slipped his shoes off before he dropped he would have made just such a noise on this wood." She grunted. "And to think of me kneeling on those stairs while he was strolling off as cool as a cucumber; he must be pretty smart. But what is his interest in a woman who is out of her head?"

Jimmy Traynor regarded his aunt thoughtfully. "That is exactly what I'm asking myself!" He suddenly faced toward the front of the house as a deafening series of explosions announced the arrival of a motor-cycle. "Here's a boy with a telegram. Let's hope it's for me and that it has some worth-while news!"

It was for Traynor, and when he had glanced at it he gave an exclamation. His eyes were alight as he handed the message to his aunt, then scribbled an answer for the waiting boy. It was not until the youth had taken his ear-splitting departure that she spoke, and then it was to read the telegram aloud in accents of curiosity.

" 'Act such as you describe played mid-western and western circuits two years ago. Team was named Barron and Barron.' What's it mean, Jimmy?"

"That's the answer to my wire to Pierce and Cobden telling them to make a round of the booking offices and see if they could find anything listed that had an alligator in it. They have! And look at the name of the team—Barron and Barron! I've just wired Pierce and Cobden to get me all information possible about them."

"You think they must be some relation——"

"It's a mighty queer coincidence if they aren't! There's one Barron we've all been forgetting—Cornelius, the youngest brother, the black sheep of the family if you can believe the others, who went West after his father's death and has never been heard of since!"

"And now he turns up in an alligator skin and tries to loot the house of the jewels! Would he have shot his own brother?"

"It's been done ever since the days of Cain and Abel," he replied grimly. "He might have been afraid that Philip would recognize him if he only held him up. The theory hangs together all right, aunty. And if it was he whom you heard this morning it might account for his interest in his invalid sister. He might have had enough family feeling left to try to see her, especially if he has gathered from neighborhood gossip that she's too loony to know him."

"They seemed to be talking to each other rationally," said Miss Landry slowly, and again her nephew looked at her thoughtfully. "Jimmy, suppose she isn't so loony as she seems. Has that possibility occurred to you?"

"Since this morning—yes. We must try to find out if such is the case—and it will be rather difficult. If we fail at this end"—he tapped the telegram significantly—"the next thing will be a trip west for me. It would take time, but once I got on the trail of the Barron and Barron outfit it would be only a matter of days before I arrived at the truth." A noise from the front of the house caught his ear. "Back to your cook-stove, aunty! Here is Miss Morand in the car! I don't think I can do better right now than to have a chat with her about old Lydia."

"You're right, Jimmy," said Miss Landry musingly. "You couldn't possibly do better."

## CHAPTER XXI

### ALLIGATOR HO!

TRAYNOR was as good as his word about interviewing Denise Morand. He waited until she had run the car around the corner of the house and put it in the garage, then met her on the front steps and relieved her of a dozen packages.

"A good morning's shopping," he said.

"Weyburn's not a bad place to get things," explained the girl, "and if I'm going to leave it's not too soon to collect a few odds and ends that I need."

"That's true; I forgot your departure was impending. Have you set a date?"

"N-no. That accident to Mr. Barron made all the difference in the world to my plans. I'd feel like thirty cents if I were to walk off now and leave Miss Keith with so much on her hands."

"That's sporting of you; I know you are not very keen about your job here."

"It's rather—unpleasant," admitted Denise gravely. "I'm sorry for her, and all that, but—it's just unpleasant," she repeated.

"Uh-huh, and if you had been around here this morning you might have used a stronger adjective." He smiled at her quick glance of inquiry. "We had regular ructions. Will you come to the study when you have dumped these things in your room? I want very much to have a chat with you."

"Of course. Have you learned anything new?"

"Nothing for publication, but I'm full to the brim with a healthy crowd of dark suspicions. You may cast a light on some of them."

"I don't think I'm much good as a detective, but I'll do what I can," said Denise, the puzzled look in her eyes deepening. "What do you mean by ructions?"

"You go along and I'll tell you later," demurred Traynor, glancing about them. "See here, on second thought, don't meet me in the study; come down to the other side of Alligator Pool and we'll have our talk there. If walls really have ears, this house is just the sort to have that kind of walls!"

"You're right, I suspect!" A sudden vision of McCarthy appearing painfully from beneath the drawing-room sofa came to her mind and brought a smile to her lips. "You never know who may be listening."

"Exactly," said Jimmy, and smiled in his turn as he bethought himself of Matilda Landry and her expectant ears. "Come along as soon as you can!"

Ten minutes later he was holding out one of the garden chairs for her beside the pool. Two hundred yards away, hidden by a bush on top of a wooden knoll, a thick-set man in rather rusty city clothes regarded them benignly. Miss Morand was clearly on the job. Good girl! He rolled the dead cigar between his teeth from one corner of his mouth to the other, and his heavy face took on an expression of deep contentment. That had been a wise move, getting a sharp young woman to keep him posted on Traynor's operations. Jimmy was clever, all right, but he'd have to realize that he didn't have the only set of brains in the country!

Denise shuddered visibly as she glanced at the pool, but she controlled herself instantly and vouchsafed a word of explanation.

"I used to sit here a great deal before Grant met his end. Now it rather gives me the shivers."

"I should have thought of that," admitted the detective with compunction. "Would you rather get up and take a stroll? We can talk just as well."

"No, thank you. Now, Mr. Traynor, we haven't very much time before lunch, and I'm crazy to know what the ructions were."

Traynor told her, giving her as much detail as possible without revealing the connection between himself and the cook. He described Tillie sitting alone in the kitchen with not another soul in the house besides the sick woman up-stairs, and having a nice gift of dramatic narrative, he soon had Denise sitting up very straight, her cheeks pale and her eyes wide. She held her breath as he pictured Tillie's expedition to the upper regions with only her nerve and her rolling-pin to sustain her courage, and she sank back exhausted as he finally arrived at the superb anti-climax of the empty closet.

She recovered promptly, and her quick brain went to work on the more salient features of his story.

"I won't suggest that Tillie was dreaming or lying. She really heard two people talking, and a man's footsteps? Then, he must have entered the house by the front door, or perhaps tiptoed past her in the kitchen while she was napping."

"Quite possible, Miss Morand."

"Of course, he was out of the window like a flash when he heard her step on the stair; he would not have

wasted his time in a closet that must surely be searched if his presence in the house were known."

"True. If that nice little point had occurred to me at the time I might have opened the closet door with less trepidation. Have you any more useful comments?"

"One, perhaps." Denise hesitated. "When Miss Barron is excited she often raises her voice. Could she have been talking to herself?"

"Talking to herself in one tone of voice and answering in another? She could, Miss Morand, she could have been doing just that. There is nothing in this case that I'd venture to call impossible."

"But—that doesn't account for the footsteps!"

"No, Miss Morand, it doesn't account for them." Traynor met Denise's glance for an instant, and then with one accord they both looked away from each other and regarded the still surface of Alligator Pool. "Interesting point—those footsteps."

"Very interesting," agreed the girl gravely.

"Perhaps we'd better make haste slowly," suggested Traynor after a moment's thoughtful silence. "Let's stick to the theory of her having had a visitor; it's saner and more logical. In that case, what were they talking about—and how could any one talk to a mentally incompetent woman and hope to get anywhere?"

"I don't know." A whimsical notion occurred to Denise and she laughed. "Perhaps he was mentally incompetent, too! Do you know, Mr. Traynor, if one nut can talk to another?"

"I think two nuts are talking to each other right now," he retorted severely. "Let us remain serious for a few minutes. I want to ask you one question very emphatically: Have you ever had any reason to believe Miss Barron mentally sounder than she appears?"

"No, I never have," answered Denise after some reflection. "I can truthfully say I never have."

"Some days ago I asked you to tell Miss Barron's doctor—Cosgrove?—that I wanted to speak to him when he could spare me a moment. Did you ever give him the message?"

"Of course! I told him the very next time he came."

"When was that—can you remember?"

"Yes. It was the day after Mr. Barron was shot."

"What did he say?"

"That he'd make a point of speaking to you the first time he had an opportunity."

"Well, he hasn't found one yet," grunted Traynor discontentedly. "I'm anxious, of course, to ask him the same question I've just asked you—that is, if he's satisfied that his patient is really as dippy as she seems. He doesn't come every day, I suppose. When do you expect him again?"

"This afternoon at three-thirty."

"I must contrive to ambush him! And now, young lady—lunch! Here comes Gwendolynne Perkins to tell us it's ready."

He did not eat a very hearty meal, though Miss Matilda Landry had rather gone out of her way to demonstrate for his benefit that strange voices and phantom footfalls around an old house had no power to shake her culinary abilities. She had made two of his favorite dishes exactly as he liked them, but the events of the morning had given him so much food for reflection that it spoiled his appetite for more material fare. Even Jocelyn's presence and cheerful chatter could not distract him from his cogitations; for the first time since he had undertaken to solve the mystery of the Barron jewel disappearance, he felt that he had

got his teeth into the problem. The detective instinct was uppermost—and Miss Keith rose from the table after lunch with an air of gay indifference that was noticed by Denise Morand if not by Jimmy.

He excused himself rather absent-mindedly, saying that he intended to smoke a pipe in the quiet of the study while he threshed out a few new ideas that had come to him.

"Don't forget that I'd like to see Cosgrove," he added to Denise Morand, dropping his voice as they left the dining-room in Jocelyn's wake. "He'll find me in the study if I don't find him first."

He went to his room, and from the depths of his suitcase routed out a villainous pipe that he rarely smoked except when in the most desperate throes of indecision. He was tempted to do something that was wonderfully intriguing and fearfully drastic, and he was afraid that if he did it and anything went wrong, Jocelyn Keith and Geoffrey might rise in righteous anger and throw him out of the house.

He did not wish that to happen. If it did, it would mean that he'd get neither the jewels nor Jocelyn. On the other hand, if he took a long chance and pulled it off he might possibly get them both. He took his pipe and went to the open window of the study, where he lingered for a few minutes, smoking and looking out at the calm untroubled surface of Alligator Pool, until a timid knock at the door aroused him from thought to action.

He went to the door and opened it.

"Hello, Gwendolynne. You want me?"

"It's the cook, if you please, sir. She would like a word with you in the pantry."

"All right. Tell her I'll be there at once."

He waited only long enough to make sure that Jocelyn was not where she could see him and wonder why the cook desired his society in the pantry. She would not connect it with the affair of the morning, for at Denise's suggestion the girl had been kept in ignorance of the phantom footfalls; there was an eerie aspect about that business which might disturb a man's nerves, let alone those of a young woman. Jimmy went silently down the hall, and when he heard Jocelyn moving about in her room, he slipped quickly off to keep the rendezvous with Miss Landry, his pulse beating a bit faster than usual. He knew very well that she would not have sent for him unless something important had come to her knowledge.

"What is it, aunty?"

"This," said the old lady quietly. She handed him a silver tablespoon by its shank. "Look at the handle!"

Traynor obeyed—and suddenly caught his breath.

"It's the same, Jimmy?"

"*Yes!* Where did you get it?"

"It came down on Lydia Barron's tray."

Aunt and nephew looked fixedly at each other for a second or two. The detective's face was a study, but his jaw was set decisively.

"This settles it!" he said. "Now we know who was walking around in her room this morning!"

"Can we *prove* it, Jimmy?"

"Yes. Not five minutes ago I was figuring out a scheme and wondering if I dared try it. Now, I'm going to! It will be tough luck if it doesn't clinch things." He meditated. "Aunty—can you scream?"

"Like a banshee!"

"Good. Set your wrist-watch with mine, and listen carefully to what I want you to do at sharp three o'clock."

Miss Landry listened obediently. At the end of his brief directions, she nodded approvingly. "Not bad, Jimmy! Yes, it ought to work." She glanced at her watch. "Three o'clock sharp; that gives me just time to get in my dinner vegetables from the garden."

He left her to this peaceful pursuit and returned to the study feeling anything but placid himself.

It was only by the exercise of all his self-control that he forced himself into the chair in front of the desk and stayed there, his pipe guttering and fuming as he smoked it nervously and furiously. He put his watch beside him—and before ten minutes had gone he had taken it up thrice to make sure it was really running. Within a very short time he would know what the turn of the cards would bring, and he felt as a gambler does who has put his last stake on the board.

At ten minutes to three he heard Jocelyn Keith leave her room and go down-stairs, whence the sound of a piano softly played came presently to his ears. Perhaps she was passing the time, perhaps it was a studied and delicate invitation—Traynor stuffed a new load of tobacco into his pipe, looked at his watch and did not trouble to wonder which.

At five minutes to three he opened the door of the study and stepped cautiously across the hall. He peered into the sick-room. Lydia Barron was asleep in her chair, a gross and repulsive spectacle, at once revolting and pathetic. A little apart from her, seated in a rocker by the window, Denise Morand was reading a

novel. She heard Traynor, looked up, and in response to a jerk of his head rose quietly and joined him.

"Will you do something for me?"

"Yes," she answered promptly.

"Go down and join Miss Keith in the drawing-room. I want this floor of the house to myself for a little while."

"I understand. You have——"

"No questions, please! Go right down."

Denise departed. Traynor went quickly back to his chair in the study. At one minute to three he stood up and strolled across the room to the open window. Now that the zero hour had arrived he was normal again, cool and calculating.

Three o'clock. From the kitchen came a piercing scream, a scream calculated to turn any banshee green with envy. Though he was expecting it, Traynor started violently. Decidedly, in whatever she undertook to do, Miss Landry was an artist! Her shrill voice ascended to the skies in a wail of sheer terror that was yet perfectly articulate.

*"The alligator! In the pool! The alligator!"*

Jimmy, in the most nonchalant fashion imaginable, drew his revolver from his hip-pocket, thrust it out the window and fired twice into the air. The sharp reports put a neat period to his aunt's cries.

Thereupon he took the center of the stage himself. He tore into the hall, shouting at the top of his voice on a note of exultation.

"I got him! Miss Keith! Miss Morand! I got the alligator! Go to the pool and see the remains!"

He tore down the back stairs, pounding heavily. He reached the kitchen door, slammed it hard. He slipped

off his shoes, and while thus engaged he saw through the window that the cook and Gwendolynne Perkins were trotting on their way to the stream, followed by Denise and Jocelyn Keith who had come from the front of the house.

His shoes in his hand, he dashed back through the main hall of the ground floor and darted up the front stairs, his flight as swift and silent as a bat's. In three cat-like leaps he covered the distance between the head of the stairs and the sick woman's room. He stopped on the threshold, and his eyes lighted with triumph as he saw the result of his little melodrama.

The wheel-chair was empty. Her form crouching beneath the sill, her face concealed by a lace curtain, Lydia Barron was peering out of the rear window of her room at the little knot of people who were gathered on the shore of Alligator Pool.

Every line of her gross body was tense beneath the coarse woolen wrapper which was her habitual garment; she was utterly unaware of the watcher in the doorway. Jimmy Traynor realized the fact, and as soon as he recovered his breath after his violent exertions, he coughed—the gentle, deprecatory cough of an intruder who knows his intrusion will not be altogether welcome.

Lydia Barron stiffened, spun on her heel and faced him. Her countenance was impassive, but hate blazed in her pale blue eyes.

"I suppose," said Jimmy dryly, "that a paralytic has to exercise her limbs now and then if she doesn't wish to lose the use of them entirely!"

The woman stalked back to her chair, seated herself in it and drew a thick blanket over her legs.

"What do you want?" she asked composedly.

"The Barron jewels," replied Jimmy as casually.

"You've discovered my secret. If you will promise to keep it, I'll tell you who took them."

"It's a bargain," answered the detective swiftly. He stole a glance out of the window. "Hurry up! They won't stay there all afternoon! Who was it?"

"Come here and I'll whisper it in your ear."

"Thanks—thanks, dear lady! This is a new suit I'm wearing and I don't care to muss it in a rough-and-tumble! Tell me his name from where you are!"

Lydia Barron shrugged and spoke two words.

Jimmy Traynor fell back a step, and there was a steely glitter in his gray eyes.

"You're speaking the truth?"

"Yes."

"How was the stunt managed?"

"I can only tell you what I saw; you'll have to learn the rest for yourself. If you'll listen a moment——"

"Come to the point! Be quick!"

In level, emotionless tones she told her story.

Two minutes later the detective, having resumed his footwear, descended the front stairs, barely in time to meet Jocelyn Keith and Denise Morand as they came through the front doorway, hot and rather flustered. Denise looked volumes of curiosity, but Jocelyn exploded into eager questions.

"Mr. Traynor! Where were you? We waited by the pool! There was no alligator, dead or alive! What does it mean? Was Tillie crazy? But you shot at it yourself! Why didn't you come down?" She stared at his amused face and repeated, half angrily, "What does it *mean?*"

"You must wait a little while for the answer, Miss Keith; you will forgive the delay, I'm sure when you hear the reason." He looked past them, through the front doorway and down the drive, into which a small two-seated car was just turning from the highway. "You must excuse me now; here comes a man I want to talk to. I shall be very busy this afternoon and evening. Wish me luck, and perhaps I'll have quite a full report to make to you and Geoffrey in the morning!"

With a smile and a nod, and without waiting for the bewildered Jocelyn to reply, he brushed between the two girls and hurried down the drive toward the approaching car. When it was almost upon him, he stepped into the center of the road and held up an authoritative hand, so that the light car came to a stop with a squealing of brakes.

"Doctor Cosgrove?"

"Well, sir?" Beady eyes surveyed him coldly from a narrow unhealthy face. "What can I do for you?"

"I've come to tell you that Miss Barron does not require your services this afternoon, but that I do."

"My services? What's the matter with you?"

"I'll tell you that when we reach your house, where you are about to drive me. Just a few questions I want you to answer, Doctor."

"Oh! And if I refuse to oblige you?"

"You'll be answering the same ones for the police within two hours. Take your choice, my dear sir!"

The unhealthy face turned a pasty white, some of the brightness passed from the beady eyes, the narrow-chested figure seemed to shrink in upon itself behind the driving-wheel of the car. "Get in!" said Doctor Cosgrove.

## CHAPTER XXII

### MOST OF THE TRUTH

Geoffrey was first at the breakfast-table the next morning. A commuter may have much to disturb him, but he is usually punctual to his first meal, and he usually catches his regular train, even if he has to do it on the run.

On this occasion, the young man made rather indifferent play with knife and fork and spoon. There were many things to trouble him, and from the manner in which he ceased chewing in the middle of a mouthful and fixed an abstracted gaze upon the silver coffee-pot, one might have assumed that he had a headache rather than an appetite. The assumption would have been correct.

At twenty minutes past eight, Jocelyn came into the dining-room. A glimpse of her face told Geoffrey that presently his headache was going to be worse.

"Geoff! Where is Mr. Traynor?"

"I don't know. I haven't laid eyes on him since two o'clock this morning."

"Two o'clock this morning!"

"That was the hour at which he threw gravel against my window. I mean, he tried to, but of course I sleep with it open and several handfuls spent the rest of the night with me in bed. I don't suppose he cared about that as long as I awoke and let him in——"

"He hasn't come down yet?"

"Excuse me, miss," broke in Gwendolynne Perkins, entering with fresh coffee in time to hear the question. "I called Mr. Traynor at the usual time, and he said he was too busy to come down and would I please bring him his regular toast and fruit and coffee on a tray. I took it to him, and then he said to tell you and Mr. Geoffrey that he would like to meet you both in the drawing-room at eight-thirty, when he would give you his final report."

"His—*what?*" asked Geoffrey. "Did you say *final* report?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Gwendolynne—you may go." Jocelyn waited until the servant had left the room. "Geoffrey, Denise Morand has disappeared!"

"Huh?"

"I knocked at her door a few mintues ago. She didn't answer, so I opened the door and went in. Her bed hadn't been slept in. Her trunk was there, but her suitcase was gone and so were all her—her more important clothes!"

"What does it mean?" Young Barron pressed a hand to his head. "Denise *gone!* Without a word to—to you or me!"

"Apparently." Jocelyn poured herself a cup of coffee and buttered a piece of toast, though it was evident that her heart was not in the business. "Don't ask *me* to explain anything! I suppose Mr. Traynor——" She broke off to listen. "Here he is now!"

She left the table and went quickly into the front hall where she was in time to see Jimmy Traynor depositing a heavy suitcase near the hat-rack.

"Mr. Traynor! Are you *leaving?*"

"Yes, Miss Keith." He greeted her with a smile that was not quite so cheery as his usual product. "The case is finished." He followed her back to the dining-room. "Through breakfast yet? You got my message? Suppose we adjourn to the drawing-room."

"Traynor! Where is Miss Morand?"

The detective took his watch out as he crossed the hall to the room opposite, followed meekly by the bemused couple, and he consulted it before answering.

"Eight-thirty. Miss Morand, then is just about one-third of the way to Chicago."

"*Chicago!*" Geoffrey turned pale. "Chicago!"

"It's a town in Illinois," amplified the detective with a gloomy smile. "I was sorry to see her go. Nice girl—awfully nice and exceptionally clever. She had her reasons for leaving, of course, and when I learned them I did not try to detain her." He sat down rather heavily on the sofa and waved them to chairs. "I'm taking the nine-fifty to the city, which gives me a clear hour to tell you the whole story and twenty minutes to get to the station."

"The whole story! You say the case is closed?"

"Yes, sir, it is. This is my final report, and I will ask you to listen carefully so that you can repeat it fully to Mr. Barron when he returns from the hospital. It is quite likely that I will be unable to do that in person." He watched Jocelyn's face as he said that, and his pulse quickened as he saw a look of sudden concern come into her eyes. "I must prepare you for some disagreeable news—and for an equally disagreeable bit of ancient history which Doctor Hendricks confided to me a few days ago. Last evening I received his permission to tell it to you two."

"You saw Hendricks last evening!"

"Yes. Just before I went to New York on——"

"New York! You went to New York! Then you came back on the midnight——"

"And threw most of the front drive at you before getting you awake! Yes. Now, will you forgive me if I ask you not to interrupt any more than you can help? It is really most important for me that I should catch the nine-fifty without fail." They nodded. "Thanks. I'm going to tell you the gist of the matter at once instead of leading up to the shock. . . .

"Philip Barron's mother—she was no relation of yours, of course—was a homicidal maniac. She tried to kill her husband, old Penobscot. She failed, and while he was off hunting the doctor she contrived to commit suicide by hanging. Hendricks was the doctor, and because Penobscot had befriended him he helped to conceal the facts from the public.

"It was bad blood, you see. Of the four children, Philip, the oldest, and Cornelius, the youngest, seem to have escaped the taint entirely; but Sidney is a surly, underhand, miserly brute with a touch of the vicious—ask George Hart to tell you the tale of a certain cat!—and the sister, Lydia, you know for yourselves. She is hardly normal!

"Lydia Barron is not witless, and she is no more a paralytic than we are. With the connivance of her scoundrelly doctor, Cosgrove, she has worked a monumental bluff for over two years. It was Lydia Barron who came upon Philip in his study, shot him from behind, and took the jewels he was examining. You will judge her more leniently if you will remember that her brain is sick——"

"Mr. Traynor!" Jocelyn spoke hardly above a whisper, and she looked aghast. "Are—are these things *true!*"

"Yes, Miss Keith, they are. I have physical as well as circumstantial evidence to prove them. Yesterday afternoon when the lunch tray came from Lydia's room, my aunt found a tablespoon——"

"Your—what! Your aunt?"

"Tillie Brown, the cook. She is really my aunt, and her name is Landry—Miss Matilda Landry. She came up here to—to"—Jimmy's face was suddenly scarlet and he gulped before continuing—"to help me in my conduct of the case. She has been very useful too." Briefly, he recounted the story of the phantom footfalls and his fruitless investigation of the empty closet. "That started me wondering about Lydia Barron; it seemed absolutely crazy to question her bona fides, but I was strongly tempted nevertheless to test her honesty. While I was debating the advisability of this, my aunt called me down to show me that tablespoon. Her sharp eyes had detected on its handle the mark of a thumb—a thumb with a small but very distinct scar—the same print that I had already found on the revolver with which Mr. Barron was shot!

"That was good enough for me. I went ahead with the little comedy of the alligator and the revolver shots, and Lydia fell into the trap. Awakened from a sound sleep, hearing the house apparently emptying itself, she let curiosity get the better of caution. She left her chair and went to the window—where she was standing when I stole up-stairs and caught her! Can you doubt her guilt after that?"

"No," said Geoffrey in a low tone, and Jocelyn

shook her head mutely. "But, Traynor—it makes me sick to think of the danger to which Jocelyn and—and Denise have been exposed all this time. Suppose that fiend had taken advantage of your absence from the house, and mine, to—to——" He shuddered. "How can you tell what a mad woman may do!"

"You can't," said the detective, and smiled cheerfully. "But I didn't wait to learn about her before taking certain precautions!" He smiled again at Jocelyn. "Like that artist, I had an uncomfortable feeling that this house was menaced by some impending danger." He raised his voice and called sharply, "Gwendolynne!"

In a moment the housemaid came to the door of the drawing-room. She stood there, looking at them nervously, her fingers twisting one corner of her white apron.

"You—you called me, sir?"

"Yes. Come in, Gwendolynne. Sit down and take your hair off."

Gwendolynne's embarrassment vanished on the instant. She sat down complacently, removed her bobbed blonde locks and revealed a close-cropped head. A pretty girl was instantly metamorphosed into a nice-looking young man. He fanned himself gently with the wig he had taken off.

"Gimme, Jimmy," he said calmly.

Traynor seemed to understand the request perfectly. He tossed a cigarette and a box of matches to the erstwhile housemaid, who lighted one and inhaled the first puff luxuriously. Geoffrey and Jocelyn, suddenly jolted from tragedy to farce, gazed speechless at the apparition.

"Show the kind lady and gentleman your legs, Gwendolynne," said the detective.

The late Miss Perkins, with a sang-froid that startled both Jocelyn and Geoffrey, reached down and pulled her short skirts up on her lap. Two shapely silk-clad limbs were exposed—and in the cotton top of each stocking was a bulge that spoiled the symmetry of the whole.

"That bump on the right is a small automatic," said Jimmy with the air of a lecturer. "The one on the left is a life-saver. You see the house has been well-protected since this portable arsenal arrived—via the kind auspices of that employment bureau whose name you mentioned, Miss Keith! Thank you, Gwendolynne; you may rearrange your dress." He turned to Geoffrey Barron and added more seriously, "Will it be convenient for you to spend the day here instead of going to the city?"

"It was my intention to do so anyway," said Geoffrey, still staring at Gwendolynne. "Why?"

"Because in that case Miss Perkins and my aunt can leave at once. Their usefulness is ended." He nodded and smiled at a perfect housemaid whose only idiosyncrasy was a disinclination to sharing a room with the cook. "Thank you, Tommy. I'm sorry I couldn't arrange the scrap with an alligator that I promised you. Better luck another time." He waved his hand, and with a cheerful grin young Mr. Hibbert left the room. Traynor turned again to the bemused Geoffrey. "You'll stay in the house, won't you, until Doctor Hendricks comes at ten-thirty with an ambulance and two male nurses? Not that we really need fear Lydia Barron any longer, for her claws are cut."

"Hendricks—male nurses—an ambulance!"

"To remove her to a sanatorium; I told him the truth last evening and he agreed with me that the step *must* be taken immediately. I was officious, perhaps, but it occurred to me that it would spare Mr. Philip Barron much pain if he came back to find her removal an accomplished fact. Old Hendricks will know how to take care of the formalities——"

"Please don't apologize for your thoughtfulness, Mr. Traynor," broke in Jocelyn, her eyes bright. "We owe you much already, and this is just another instance of your kind helpfulness."

"Very decent of you, Traynor," grunted Geoffrey. "Thanks."

"A few more details about that interesting lady. She was really impoverished, really an invalid, when her brother took her in. But some of her investments turned up trumps and put her back on her financial feet, while Cosgrove restored to her the use of her physical ones. It was from him that I got this information. He was her messenger to the outer world, you see. He's a dope fiend, and entered into a conspiracy with her for so much cash per month. She was very comfortable here, she got loads of good things to eat, she had a personal attendant, she had no need to lift a finger for herself—and it suited her mad humor to deceive Philip and go on getting these comforts for nothing. Also, she had her eyes on the jewels and thought that being established in the house would enable her to hunt for them.

"Cosgrove is unscrupulous, but apart from that he is a mean and pitiful little crook. He yielded to his craving for drugs and lent himself to anything that

would get him their price. He had a soft thing in Lydia Barron, never dreaming that he was nursing a Frankenstein monster; when she shot her brother and swiped the jewels, he went nearly insane with terror. Nevertheless, she dominated him completely and had her will with him; she did not know what might result from her crime, she dared not conceal the loot in a house that might be rigorously searched, so she compelled Cosgrove to take charge of them. When I came down upon him like a thousand of brick he—well, he simply groveled. He gave me the jewels."

Jimmy paused on that simple statement, which he made not without pride. Perhaps there had been nothing very brilliant about his work on this case, but after all a detective is judged principally by the results he achieves, and he had scored a clear success in the present affair. He had been told to get the jewels and he had got them!

Rather to his disappointment, neither Geoffrey nor Jocelyn evinced more than the faintest interest in his triumph. Perhaps they had heard so much about those jewels all their lives that the very mention of them was simply boring. There remained yet what was to them the strangest feature of the whole business, and they were waiting for the detective to explain that. Jocelyn put their desire into words.

"The alligator, Mr. Traynor!" She smiled rather feebly. "I don't suppose Lydia was the alligator, was she?"

"Oh—the alligator!" Jimmy Traynor gave a little laugh. "Apart from the misfortune of Grant's death, the alligator was simply the comic relief in this case. I guessed the secret of the alligator—barring only its

identity—in the very beginning. It seemed implausible that any human being could disguise himself successfully as a saurian, but it was even more implausible that there was a real alligator, over eight feet long, walloping around a peaceful stream in Weyburn County. When confronted by two implausibilities, put your money on the more plausible; I decided our reptile had a human interior.

"The sketches left behind him in various places were plainly intended to mystify and confuse, but the stunt was rather overdone and in at least one instance—the case of Sidney—they helped to clarify the situation. It was obvious that *he* could not have entered the house at will and scattered them about—I let him go from my thoughts, and he did not return to them until the shooting of Mr. Barron and the second theft of the jewels, together with the possibility that he might have inherited a murderous disposition, brought him into the limelight again. I then played a little trick on him and satisfied myself that he was not in possession of the jewels."

"What trick?" interjected Geoffrey.

Traynor told them of his visit to Sidney and the ruse he had adopted to awaken the old man's miserly cupidity, and both Jocelyn and Geoffrey congratulated him on the cleverness of his scheme.

"But we're getting away from the alligator!" protested the girl. "It may have been the comic relief to you, but it certainly had us puzzled and frightened!"

"Yes, it's not the sort of critter you care to have around the back yard," smiled Traynor.

"When I found the secret compartment in the study desk—you must get Geoffrey to show you that, Miss

Keith—I found one of those alligator sketches. On the bottom of the brass plate were some finger-prints left by Grant, which I showed to Mr. Barron, but I did not tell him something else that I had discovered beneath a powerful glass. *Superimposed* on some of the prints were certain smudges that were made, I was confident, by gloved fingers! Somebody had opened the cache between the time that Grant took the clue and I happened along. That somebody, in my opinion, had left the sketch deliberately to link Sidney with the disappearance of the jewels—the first alligator, you remember, was on the note he sent to Grant.

"That increased my interest in the sinful saurian, who, I was sure, was not Sidney, and who I firmly believed had secured the paper from the butler and thereafter looted the treasure.

"I could not imagine to save my life how the alligator had timed his arrival in the pool to coincide so exactly with Grant's presence there. I had to give up theorizing about that point, or get an attack of nervous prostration. I concentrated on finding the disguise, and searched the banks of the river in the direction of Sidney's house. I assumed, of course, that the man, whoever he might be, could not play alligator indefinitely up-and-down a country stream and that, his purpose accomplished, he would endeavor to hide the costume as soon as possible rather than pack it around in broad daylight.

"I told Mr. Barron that I expected to find the alligator up a tree, which was literally true but which I could see inspired in him the gravest doubts of my sanity! When I searched the banks of the stream I kept looking overhead on the chance that the fellow

might have tossed his awkward burden into some forked branches, but he had even a better cache. Miss Keith very kindly accompanied me on that expedition and it was solely due to her that it was eventually successful. I never would have discovered the whereabouts of the skin so early in the game if she had not lead me to the spot."

"You found the skin!" cried Geoffrey, and added reproachfully. "Why didn't you tell *me*, either of you? Where was it?"

Jocelyn reddened painfully and avoided his eyes, but Jimmy Traynor had no such conscientious qualms as afflicted her.

"I asked Miss Keith to mention our discovery to no one; it is an excellent plan not to tell any one anything until it is absolutely necessary. I'm glad now that we didn't tell you—it would have been both awkward and embarrassing. You see, we found it in a hiding-place whose existence was known only to you and Miss Keith. Do you remember the secret cupboard you made as children in that small cabin in the woods? That was where the skin was concealed—and Miss Keith didn't put it there!"

Geoffrey Barron came slowly to his feet, his eyes angry.

"Are you crazy enough to suggest that *I* did?"

"Not for a minute; not *now!* At that time the fact had a rather ugly look, you must admit. Don't blame us—we weren't responsible for appearances being against you! Sit down and be reasonable."

"All right," Geoffrey resumed his chair, still inclined to be sulky. "But I wish you'd come to the point. If you know who the alligator was, tell us!"

"Uh-huh. It was Lydia Barron who first told me, and for a minute I thought she was as loony as we had ever believed her to be. She took my discovery of her ability to walk very coolly, never dreaming that I had gone farther and assured myself of her guilt in regard to the shooting. She proposed a bargain: if I would not give her secret away, she would tell me who had stolen the jewels! I closed with her——"

"But she stole them herself!"

"That was the second time they were stolen; you remember we had already determined from their appearance in the study that there must have been *two* thefts. Lydia didn't confess to hers—no, sir, she is much too downy a bird for that! She didn't confess to her dealings with the doctor, either; I simply deduced his complicity from the evidence I had, and when I told him what I knew and pretended to him that his pet patient had squealed on him, he went all to pieces and squealed himself! A simple and ancient but always useful device to wring the truth from a crook!"

"Please don't mind him!" cried Jocelyn earnestly. "Whom did Lydia name? Who was the first thief?"

"I wish you could put two and two together for yourselves and get the answer; I really hate to put it into words, knowing that it must shock you both." Traynor's pleasant face wore an expression of regret. "If you can't, I suppose I must tell you. The first thief—the galloping gator—was that accomplished and charming young lady whom we have known as Denise Morand."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### MORE OF THE TRUTH

"IT—IT is simply impossible!"

It was Jocelyn who spoke, more than half a minute after Traynor had made his announcement. He only looked at her and threw out his hands helplessly, but eloquently, as if to say that it was beyond his power to alter the facts. It was Geoffrey, his jaw set, who answered her criticism.

"Yes, it's possible. It's—true! I see it all now. I showed her that cupboard one day while we were strolling through the woods. That is how she knew of its existence."

"Exactly. Yes, that was what she told me." Traynor glanced apologetically at Jocelyn. "I had a long talk with her early last evening, and she told me the story of her life and how she came to make her attempt upon the Barron jewels."

To his surprise, as he was speaking, the white shocked look on Jocelyn's face gave way to the evidence of a very different kind of emotion. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes flamed, her lips parted.

"Denise Morand!" she cried angrily. "The girl who professed to be my friend, who accepted our hospitality and the shelter of our roof! Denise Morand! A low, despicable *thief!*"

"Oh, *please!*" interrupted Traynor distressfully. "Don't judge her so harshly—wait, at least, until you hear her side of it!"

"Her side of it!" Jocelyn's scorn was switched in part to the detective's account. "Can anything excuse treachery? Can anything excuse *theft?* And—and *you,* Mr. Traynor, you knew the truth and yet you let her go! No doubt you can explain that!"

"I can, Miss Keith, at least to my own satisfaction." He spoke quietly, but a touch of red came to each of his cheek-bones. "At the risk of seeming rude, I must remind you that in the last analysis I am responsible for my actions only to my employer, your uncle, Philip Barron, and while he is ill and unable to manage his own affairs, my conscience is clear as long as I act in accordance with what I believe to be his wishes."

"You think he would pardon a thief——"

"Stop scrapping, you two." Geoffrey had taken out his handkerchief and was twisting it between his moist palms. "Traynor, I'm just as upset and surprised as Jocelyn, but I'm anxious to hear what you have to say. Frankly, though, you've got to make out a pretty good case for her in order to excuse her—her dishonorable conduct."

Traynor stared at him. Here was a young man who he knew had professed to be in love with Denise Morand, whom he had actually heard proposing to her in the summer-house less than two weeks before, and who now was talking about the lady's "dishonorable conduct" before he had listened to a word of explanation. Jimmy ran his fingers through his hair. He did not quite understand the type, and wasn't sure that he wished to. He took his gaze away from Geoffrey easily enough and transferred it to his watch.

"I'll tell you, as briefly and as quickly as I can. I must catch that train.

"As soon as I decided in my own mind that the alligator was a human being in disguise, I wrote to a firm of detectives in New York and asked them to make a round of the costume supply houses there to see if they could locate the manufacturer of such an elaborate fancy dress. They failed, but in the meantime I had found the skin itself and had noticed a spot of greasepaint on one of the scales. That suggested the stage, or vaudeville, where such a stain might easily be picked up in a dressing-room. Consequently, I directed the New York people to query the more prominent booking-agents to learn if an act featuring an alligator was known to them. I got my response by telegram only yesterday noon. Such an act had toured the western circuits some years ago, and the name of the team was—Barron and Barron."

*"Barron and——"*

"The incidence of the name and the locality was too significant to be missed," continued Traynor, overriding the interruption. "I realized at once that we had none of us given a thought to Cornelius Barron, the youngest brother, who had gone west and had never been heard from since. It seemed evident that he was being heard from now in real earnest, and that he was having *his* shot at the jewels.

"That telegram came only a couple of hours before I called Lydia's bluff. When she told me that she had seen Denise Morand playing alligator, I knew the truth. Just as soon as I could clear up the Cosgrove angle, and one or two other matters, I went after Denise and invited her to come through with the facts. She was sensible enough to do so.

"She is really Denise Barron, daughter of Corne-

lius and a Frenchwoman named Celeste Morand, whom he married in the West. Celeste died a long while ago, and Cornelius died a few years later—in poverty. He was a decent sort, apparently, but he did not have the gift of making money.

"Denise was left with an older brother, Cornelius junior. They had to do something to make their living, and the girl's clever brain conceived the notion of a quite original vaudeville act. From childhood up she had been familiar with the story of her grandfather and the alligator farm; that, and the fact that she and her brother were both superb swimmers, gave her the germ of her idea.

"She devised the costume that has caused us so much excitement since, and she played the part in the show. She is very slender, very supple—she did not tell me that she is a contortionist, but I should not be surprised if she were. A huge tank filled with water was put on the stage, Cornelius appeared as the possessor of a wonderful trained alligator, the alligator was dropped into the tank and he followed it. Of course all sorts of tricks were possible, many of them amusing. When the audience had marveled and laughed their fill, the alligator flopped out on the stage, sat up and pulled a few strings, and Denise's pretty face emerged from its throat. The act, as the saying goes, went over big.

"Cornelius developed lung trouble. He had to give up his tank performance, and presently everything else. He was obliged to retreat to a mountain sanatorium, where he held his own while the funds lasted. But these dwindled and dwindled, and though Denise worked herself half to death she was unable to give him all the luxuries and attention that might have

saved his life. When he died, she felt that his death was directly due to lack of money. The reflection—annoyed her." Traynor cleared his throat.

"She broke down herself and was seriously ill. It was while she was convalescing that the memory of her family history began to prey on her mind. She grew bitter as she thought of her father and the shabby treatment he had received from his brothers and sister—especially in the case of the jewels. By the time she was entirely recovered, she had determined to come east with the deliberate intention of learning the present whereabouts of the jewels and of—er—sequestering them if she could find the opportunity.

"It wasn't very difficult for her to locate you, Miss Keith, and to strike up a mild friendship with you. She took her mother's name and called herself Denise Morand. You know what that friendship led to! She honestly believed it a sort of heavenly benediction on her enterprise when you proposed that she should come here, as a member of the household, to take care of her aunt, Lydia Barron!

"She was at once pleased and disappointed to learn that the jewels had never been found; she doubted her ability to find them, but on the other hand, she had as good a chance as any one.

"To her amusement, she soon noticed that the butler was conducting a still-hunt for them. Naturally she kept a sharp eye on his activities, though she was far too clever to let him guess that his quest was known to her.

"The day came when she surprised him up-stairs in the study, and a glimpse at his face told her that he was laboring under some tremendous excitement. She

watched through the crack of the door of her patient's room and saw him hurry from the study jamming a paper into his pocket as he went. A minute later, looking from the window, she saw him settle himself in a chair on the other side of the pool—one of his pet retreats.

"Denise is a quick and clear thinker. She remembered the alligator costume in the bottom of her trunk —she had not wished to pay storage on it, nor had she the heart to sell that souvenir of the days with her brother—and she mapped out a sudden scheme that seemed as if it might be practical. She slipped into her room, dug out the alligator skin, left the house unobserved and hastened to the cabin in the woods. It took her only a few minutes to get into the familiar rig. Then she crept to the river, slid off the bank and floated with the current to a point just behind Grant.

"Her object, of course, was to frighten him into dropping the precious paper and fleeing for his life. When he fell, as she thought, in a faint, it struck her merely that she had succeeded admirably. She closed the alligator jaws on her trophy, swam back with some difficulty, emerged and scrambled into the hut. There she remembered the secret cupboard which you, Geoffrey, had shown her one day; she thrust the skin into it, reclothed herself and straightened her hair, returned to the house—and was met by the terrified maid with the news of Grant's death!

"She did not lose her nerve for an instant; we have seen her faint twice, but she confessed to me that each occasion was a fake designed to make us think her hysterical and weak. She is anything but that!

"She took charge of the situation, telephoned the

doctor and you, Miss Keith, then went out and joined the artist, Perry Johnson.

"That Grant had died as a result of her act was a terrible shock to her, and she could not condone what she had done by reminding herself that he had died while committing a crime himself, just as a burglar might be killed while breaking into a house. The memory of his tragic end preyed on her conscience night and day, as one may readily believe.

"That did not stop her, however, from locating the jewels. The clue with its cryptic language hardly puzzled her ten minutes. She watched her opportunity and took them.

"Philip Barron had given her, at her own request, the rather gruesome task of packing Grant's belongings, and while she was thus engaged she came upon the note written by Sidney and recognized his writing. That was her first intimation that her uncle had been conniving with the butler to rob his brother's house.

"The old feeling of bitterness surged up in her breast. On the sole occasion when her father had written home for temporary help it had been to Sidney, and he had been brutally and contemptuously refused. Now Denise saw an opportunity to pay off an old score in a manner that appealed to her sense of humor—a grim one, if you please. She did not doubt that Sidney would be able to clear himself in the event of any serious charge being brought against him, but before he succeeded he would be subjected to a fearful amount of annoyance! Without any hesitation, she drew the picture of an alligator on the back of Sidney's note, stuck another in the empty cache in the kitchen, and forthwith carried the note to Philip in the study.

"Subsequently, she brought her own wits to bear on the desk in that room, and her eyes were quick enough to see where Grant had barely scratched the brass plate with a slip of his screw-driver. She took up the plate, and out of sheer determination to show that nothing was concealed from her she dropped the third sketch into the compartment.

"My arrival on the scene did not fill her with any happiness. She decided, since her object had been obtained, to call it a good job and go, and she sought an interview with Philip to obtain his permission. He granted it reluctantly, for he had grown to have quite a liking for this pretty and attractive young woman.

"She had reckoned without her conscience, which was pricked by Philip's kindness; in a flash it came to her that she could not take those jewels that had cost a man's life; she saw that the only thing she could do to square herself with her own self-respect was—restitution!

"She went and got her loot and brought it to him. She told him what she had done.

"I wish Philip's kindness had continued a little longer, but he is a hard man in some respects. He abused her roundly, told her she was as worthless and dishonorable as her father before her, took the jewels and ordered her to leave the house as soon as possible. He did, however, promise *not to prosecute her!*

"That is why, after she had accompanied me to New York, I shook hands with her and wished her the best of luck. She's a good sport, is Denise Morand, and she deserves something better than criticism and censure from both of you. She might have taken the jewels and left at once, unsuspected by anybody, but

she didn't. One reason she stayed, Miss Keith, was to help you when the servants fled. As for you, Geoffrey, you had been nice to her and she could not bear to think of circumstantial evidence piling up against you to implicate you in her crime; so she made that alligator print in the mud—the lightness of the print made me doubt that the animal could be real—and pretended to see the creature at the moment of our arrival, when you couldn't possibly have been in the disguise. Her intent was to divert my suspicions from you, and she succeeded admirably."

Traynor looked appealingly at the two before him as he ended his speech for the defense, but their faces did not soften. Geoffrey only stared at the floor, his lips set in a straight line; beneath her level brows, Jocelyn's eyes were hard. The detective said no more, but he gave a little ejaculation as he glanced again at his watch.

"This has taken longer than I thought it would. I must be on my way. Miss Keith, I wonder if you will drive me——"

"One second," interrupted Geoffrey Barron, rousing himself with a start. "We've been so—so interested in your account that we've forgotten the cause of all the trouble. Where are the jewels?"

"Exactly what I want to know!" said a gruff voice outside the open window. Startled, those in the room turned to see a man regarding them calmly—a man in clothes the worse for wear, whose round red face was surmounted by a dusty derby thrust back on his head. He fixed an accusing eye upon them all, but mostly upon Traynor. "Yes, sir, that's just what I want to know myself! Jimmy—*where are they?*"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### STAGGERING MC CARTHY

"McCarthy!" exclaimed Traynor, and a sudden sickness of disappointment and despair nearly overwhelmed him. He rose to his feet from the sofa, gazing incredulously at the thick-set figure which proceeded lumberingly to climb through the window. "What are you doing here?"

"And who *are* you?" added the astounded Geoffrey.

McCarthy told the young man briefly who he was.

"And I think I've arrived just in time to save your lot of jewelry for you. I got a message this morning that Jimmy had recovered the loot but had afterward gone to New York. Is that right?"

"I—I believe so," said Geoffrey, looking helplessly at Traynor. "What does this mean, Traynor?"

"Oh—ask *him!*" said Jimmy dully.

"Have you got the jewels from him yet, sir?"

"N-no. No, I haven't."

"Nor ever would have if I hadn't butted in!" proclaimed McCarthy triumphantly. "As it is, I think Jimmy will listen to reason and turn them over like a sensible lad—eh, Jimmy?"

"Mac, I've known you to do some dumb things, but this is the dumbest ever."

"Ye-ah?" The city officer took a cigar from his pocket, bit the end off and thrust it in his mouth, where he cocked it at a jaunty angle. "I've stolen a march

on you this time, Jimmy; it's the jewels and the reward for me, or the hoosgow for you! Where are they?"

"Mr. Traynor!" demanded Jocelyn. "Who is this man, and what does he mean talking to you like that?"

"Oh—ask *him!*" repeated Traynor wearily.

"I can tell you in a few words, miss. Jimmy——" McCarthy caught Traynor's eye, flushed and faltered. "Maybe you'd rather tell them yourself, Jimmy!"

"Notice that, Miss Keith? Despite his rough exterior, Mac has a heart of gold and a generous disposition!" Traynor shrugged his shoulders. "I meant you to know the truth, but I didn't mean you to learn it just this way. What McCarthy is trying to tell you is that I am known to the police as a thief. It is true. I once served three years in state's prison for burglary. In mere justice to myself, I wish to add that at this moment I have every intention of going straight in the future—and that your jewels are perfectly safe."

"A *thief!*" Jocelyn crimsoned, then went white. *You*—a thief!"

"The jewels are safe, are they?" put in McCarthy, a man of one idea at a time. "Where are they?"

"Mac, you've made a fearful mistake." Jimmy Traynor had seen the look in Jocelyn's eyes, and his face was pinched and drawn. He could not feel that anything mattered very much now, and it was pure instinct that impelled him to struggle through the meshes of the net which was closing about him. "I was going to the city on the nine-fifty, but you've made me miss it. Now, if you're not in a hurry yourself, I think we'd better have some explanations."

"I've all the time in the world, Jimmy, and I fairly dote on the sound of your voice," said McCarthy, who had something resembling a sense of humor. "I dare

say in the course of the conversation we'll learn where the jewels are!"

"You will." As though it had become a nervous habit with him, Traynor looked again at his watch. "First, Mac, I want to ask you about that message you got this morning—the one that said I had found the jewels and had gone to New York. Who sent it to you?"

"I thought that would puzzle you," answered McCarthy, and his smile was almost genial. He rolled his cigar to the other corner of his mouth and winked. "This wasn't anything I could handle from the outside looking in; I had to know what was going on, and especially what you were doing. See? Leave it to me, Jimmy, to fix a little thing like that! I had a talk with that trained nurse—Miss Morand—and arranged with her to keep an eye on you. See?" He glanced about him. "Where is she? She delivered the goods, and I'd like to have her in at the finish."

"You—you hired Denise Morand to spy on me!" Traynor felt almost dizzy. "Mac—*did* you?"

"I did. Neat—*huh?*"

"Mac! If Headquarters ever hears of it!"

"Wh-what?" McCarthy knew Jimmy—knew his voice, his air, his manner. There was something in all of these now that gave the officer a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. "What about Headquarters?"

"I wonder what they'll say if they learn that you hired the thief herself to help you recover some loot!"

"The—thief—herself!" A dull flush suffused McCarthy's round countenance. He glanced at Jocelyn, but Jocelyn's face was sunk in her hands; he glanced at Geoffrey, who was listening with keen interest. "Is that right? Did Miss Morand steal the jewels?"

"Beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Shall I go on, Mac?" asked Traynor, coming generously to the rescue of an enemy grievously wounded. "Let me tell you the thing from beginning to end."

"Shoot—Jimmy!"

Traynor shot. From the death of Grant down to the departure of Denise for Chicago, he followed the history of the case step by step. He succeeded in impressing McCarthy vastly, but he also gave that simple soul a chance to catch his breath and recover his aplomb.

"All right, Jimmy. My name is mud as far as Denise is concerned. But—where are those jewels?"

"Patience, Mac!"

"Patience nothing!" McCarthy slapped his heavy thigh resoundingly. "I've got it now! You were working in with her!" He sprang to his feet. "That note of hers was a bluff! She's on her way to Chicago this minute with those jewels!" He swung upon Geoffrey. "You got a telephone in this house—eh?"

"Mac! Don't start anything you can't finish!" Traynor was on his feet. "Did you hear me say the jewels were safe and that I proposed to go straight?"

"Ye-ah. I *heard* you! The song of the nightingale and the coo of the dove are harsh compared to the voice of Jimmy Traynor chucking a bluff! Jimmy!"—the officer waved a thick forefinger admonishingly—"I know you! Going straight—eh?"

"Surprises you, does it?"

"Surprises is not the word, Jimmy," said McCarthy with rich sarcasm. "Too mild; say it staggers me."

"Will you believe me if I give you the jewels?"

"What—after this?" The city detective was suddenly serious. A kindly man at bottom, he wished to think well of humanity, but all his experience had

twisted his convictions in the opposite direction. "I've never had anything but a friendly feeling for you outside of business, Jimmy. I'd like nothing better than to see you go straight. But it's too late for you to convince me on this deal. Turn in the loot now, and I'll know it's because you've got brains—not honesty."

"Nothing could convince you of my sincerity? You've got some imagination, Mac, even if you are a city detective. Think it over."

"Nothing," said McCarthy firmly. "You'd have swiped the stuff if I hadn't come along, and if you turn it in now—it will be because you're scared! As for your intending to go straight—*bunk!*"

For all his coldness, for all his habitual indifference to what others thought of him, Traynor felt a lump come into his throat. He looked at Jocelyn Keith, whose face was still buried in her hands; he looked at Geoffrey, who avoided his eyes; he looked at McCarthy, and McCarthy rolled his cigar at him; finally, he turned and looked out the window that commanded a view of the front drive.

"Rather hard," he muttered half aloud. "Makes a man wonder if reform is worth while." He turned again, and a new crispness in his cool voice caught the police officer's ear. "Mac, I'm going to convince you!"

"You are not!"

There was a step on the front porch, and from the kitchen region of the house came the faint summons of a bell. Traynor spoke quietly.

"Will you answer the door, Miss Keith? I am sure it is something for you, and I saw Gwendolynne and my aunt leave some minutes ago."

Jocelyn rose at the sound of her name. She looked neither to right nor left as she moved toward the door

and out into the hall. There was a mumble of voices from the piazza, and after what seemed ages she reappeared, bearing a heavy, brown-paper package.

"Something for me—registered mail," she said.

"Will you open it, please, Miss Keith?"

Mechanically she obeyed. She placed it on a small table in the center of the room, broke two heavy red seals, slipped the loop of a stout piece of cord over one end of the package, unrolled the paper and let its contents fall upon the table. For all her preoccupation, she stepped back with a little gasp. Geoffrey sprang forward and stared. McCarthy, usually a phlegmatic soul, said something that only the Recording Angel noted. Traynor alone remained outwardly unmoved.

"I went to New York last evening especially to post that," he said. "There's a note with it, Miss Keith. Normally it would be strictly confidential, but as things are I will ask you to read it aloud—for the benefit of Mr. McCarthy!"

Jocelyn took up the enclosure with trembling fingers. In a voice that shook, she began to read.

"'My dear Miss Keith:—If I have timed things nicely I shall be well on the way to New York before you receive this. Whether or not I ever return must depend upon yourself. It gives me great pleasure to hand you these jewels, but with them I must give you some information about myself. I have a criminal record, I have been a thief, I have done time in a state prison. A man's past, however, need not govern his future, and it is my present intention to go straight from now on. That intention has been fixed since I met you two weeks ago by Alligator Pool. I won't ask you to accept the promise for the deed; the only proof

of the pudding is in the eating. You have my office address; will you write and tell me if I have your permission to come to you at the end of a year—to report progress? With all my heart and hope, believe me, faithfully yours, James Traynor.'"

The note fluttered from the girl's fingers to the floor. A rather ghastly silence fell upon the little drawing-room. McCarthy took his cigar from his mouth to breathe more freely. The one crook in an otherwise honest assemblage controlled the situation.

"Miss Keith, you—understand?" he asked finally.

Jocelyn started at the sound of his voice. By a magnificent effort she pulled herself together and contrived to speak from a cool, well-balanced brain rather than from her disordered emotions.

"Yes—I understand. I understand—so *much!* That girl—man, I mean—Gwendolynne—it comes back to me now! You told us a story of some female impersonator who—who stole a cross from a convent! That was—Gwendolynne?"

"Yes."

"And Tillie Brown—the cook—she was your aunt?"

"Yes."

"They are your—*gang!* Is that the right word? We have been living in a nest of thieves!"

Traynor jumped visibly, but he kept himself in hand.

"My aunt is an honest woman. As for Gwendolynne—we do not stoop to spoons, Gwendolynne and I! You will find your silver in order!"

"I will take your word for it—after I have counted it!" said Jocelyn slowly. In that moment she was altogether admirable, for whether a person be great of

soul or small, he or she can only acquire merit by being consistent. Jocelyn was true to her own nature as she continued in icy tones. "You are—a thief?"

"Yes." He did not quarrel with the tense.

"An ex-convict?"

"Yes."

"And this"—she stooped and picked up the awkwardly phrased note that had accompanied the parcel—"this is a—a declaration of—of love?"

"Yes. If I have made a mistake—forgive me!"

Jocelyn Keith read the letter carefully through a second time. The next moment, with quick decisive movements of her slender fingers, she tore it into strips that fell slowly to her feet. Her eyes met his.

"That—*that* is the answer?" he muttered.

"That is your answer. I don't care whether you reform or not—but I hope I never lay eyes on you again," said Jocelyn Keith.

It was Geoffrey's arm that caught her as she began to sway. He assisted her gently to a chair, and again her face sank between her hands.

McCarthy, in his rough way a creature of infinite tact, stepped up to the table and put his bulky body between the detective and Jocelyn Keith, so that they could not see each other. He stretched forth a stubby finger and gingerly poked it through one of the finest collections of precious stones that he had ever seen. After a decent interval, he turned to Traynor.

"So—you really meant it, Jimmy!"

"I really did."

"Me—me bhoy, I've done you dirt!" said the city officer huskily. "Jimmy— I'm *sorry!*"

"Oh, that's all right, Mac," said Jimmy Traynor.

## CHAPTER XXV

### JEWELS AND THE GIRL

"Do you mind if we stop a minute?" asked McCarthy.

They were half-way to the station.

"Your legs are longer than mine," said the city detective, "and the ten-thirty will probably be late anyway." He up-ended the suitcase he was carrying, sat upon it gratefully and wiped his heated brow. "I have twice your muscle above the waist, Jimmy, but——"

"I forgot all about that bag, Mac. Excuse me. I was thinking of something else."

"Sure. Anyway, I suppose I ought to carry it as long as I'm seeing you off to New York. You don't mind that, do you? The sheriff here is a particular friend of mine, and it wouldn't be fair to him if I left you and a bunch of jewels both loose in his neck of the woods."

"I know. You're running me out of town." Traynor smiled bitterly. "There isn't a town in the country I'd rather be run out of!"

"Sure. You've had a pretty thin time here, Jimmy." McCarthy attended further to his forehead. Then, being a blunt man as well as a tactful, he asked a blunt question. "You fell in love with that Keith girl, Jimmy?"

"Uh-huh. Yes!"

"I deduced it from the note that you sent with the

jewels. Traynor, you may have twice my brains, but I've got twice your age and experience—especially with women. I'll give you a piece of advice, and you can take it or leave it. The next time you fall in love, don't go out of your own class."

"You're right, Mac," admitted Traynor humbly. "A man gets carried off his feet and thinks he can pull himself up by his own boot-straps. She is miles too good for me!"

McCarthy did not answer. He cast a curious glance upon the face of his unconscious companion, then rose and picked up his burden. They did not speak again until the ten-thirty was rumbling into the station; Traynor tossed his suitcase on to the rear platform of a car and turned for a last word with his official enemy.

"Good-by, Mac. We haven't either of us done very well up here!"

"Can't hit the bull's-eye every time, Jimmy. Anyway, you have just about broken even; you didn't get the jewels, but you didn't get the girl either."

"Huh? I don't—understand!"

"No. You didn't understand me a few minutes ago, did you? When I said you shouldn't have gone out of your class, I didn't mean that she was too good for you; I meant she wasn't good enough."

*"All abo-o-oard!"*

"No hard feelings, Jimmy?"

"We'll have dinner together, Mac, the first chance I get!"

Traynor entered the day-coach and swung his suitcase above the nearest vacant seat, which was practically the last in the car. It was a matter of custom with him to take rear seats, since that meant the other

passengers' backs were turned to him and he could observe them instead of being observed.

He had not brought anything to read, but he hardly noticed the omission. He had enough to think of. He didn't even raise his head as the leisurely local pulled up with a jar at Weyburn Junction, but thirty seconds later he jumped in his seat as a light hand fell on his shoulder.

"Good morning, Mr. Traynor," said a tired but cheerful voice. "If you are still speaking to an exceptionally clever young woman, perhaps you will move over and let me have the window side."

"Miss Morand!" He rose quickly. *"You!"*

"Thanks." She had only a small black hand-bag with her which she dropped negligently on the seat; she was really very tired, as she showed when she took off her hat and relaxed as best she might against the stiff uncomfortable upholstery of the coach. "Oh—this feels good!"

"Where in the world have you come from? Why aren't you half-way to Chicago?"

"What an ungracious welcome! Chicago? You aren't much of a detective, Mr. Traynor, are you? You saw me to the train but you didn't see me *off* on it! As a matter of fact, I came back with you on the midnight to Tarryville, though I got out at Weyburn Junction."

"Weyburn Junction!"

"There's a sort of railroad hotel and restaurant there—I don't imagine you've heard of it—run by a man named Barney——"

The name struck a chord of memory in Traynor's mind. After a moment he placed it; George Hart—a

checker tournament—first prize a bottle of rye—at Barney's restaurant.

"Yes, I've heard of it. What about it?"

"Barney is a bootlegger and a bad egg generally, I suspect, but when he was young he knew my father and liked him very much. He's an old dear. When I told him I was Cornelius Barron's daughter he wanted to throw the house wide open and give me an impromptu party, but I managed to make it clear that I was traveling very much incognita, not to say sub rosa! I got a few hours' sleep, and early this morning I took his car and drove by the back road to a point near the house——"

"The house! The *Barron* house?"

"Of course. Where else would I be going? There's a cut through the woods from the back road that comes out at Alligator Pool, and after I had parked the car, I took it. No one was awake in the house but your aunt and Gwendolynne, who were getting breakfast. I didn't mind *them!* Mr. Traynor—what do you suppose your aunt did?" Denise smiled at him. "She threw her arms around me and kissed me!"

"I can understand the impulse perfectly. I'm only surprised that Gwendolynne didn't beat her to it."

"Gwendolynne tried!" Miss Morand gurgled softly at the recollection. "He said I ought to become a professional pugilist!"

"Impertinent young pup!" said Traynor, and was rather surprised to find himself genuinely resentful of Gwendolynne's essay in osculation. "But go on, please; what were you up to in that house?"

"I was devoured by curiosity; I swore I was going to be in on that interview. I was!"

"Good night! Where were you?"

"Under the sofa. I got that trick from McCarthy. You came down on my head *awfully* hard once!" She put up her hand and felt the spot tenderly. "Gracious, my hair must be in a fearful mess!"

It was, but instead of confirming her belief, as he started to do, Jimmy found himself blurting out his true opinion.

"It's beautiful just the way it is. Leave it alone."

"I escaped from the house by the window, unseen, when the room was finally empty. I heard McCarthy say he was going to take you to this train, so I got back to my car and drove like mad to Weyburn to head you off. Couldn't have made it if you hadn't been twenty minutes late, as I had to stop and make Ted Barney swear he'd never tell a soul that he'd seen me this morning—and I know he'll keep his word for my father's sake. He kissed me too! Then I rushed to the station and just caught this poky old train!"

"Well, I was never more pleased to see any one in my life," said Jimmy honestly. "I've been feeling quite sorry to think that you were in Chicago and that we might never meet again. Now, tell me why you were so eager to overtake me."

"For one thing, I thought you'd like to hear the latest news from the Barron family." A slow smile, not too unkindly, lighted her face. "What do you think happened in the drawing-room after you and McCarthy left?"

"Give it up."

"My Geoffrey and your Jocelyn fell on each other's necks!"

"I hope they broke them," said Jimmy sorely. He

digested the news, and, accustomed to analyze his emotions, made a note of the fact that it did not distress him in the least. "You mean they're engaged?"

"Absolutely! They fixed it all up then and there, while I sweltered and fidgetted under that beastly old sofa. I thought they'd *never* go and give me a chance to escape! They're going to be married as soon as Philip comes home."

"Good luck to 'em!"

"Insufferable pair of prigs," said Denise simply. "When I heard Jocelyn doing the cold and haughty beauty act at you, I could have slapped her silly face."

"Uh-huh. If it comes to that, I was fairly peevish over the way they blackguarded you——"

"I know. You stuck up for me very handsomely, Mr. Traynor!"

"I—I always will, I hope," he said hesitatingly. "I don't know how highly you value my friendship, but if you ever get into a hole, will you—will you just holler for me?"

"I'll holler," said the girl, and her eyes were shining as she glanced at him. "Thank you."

"There's something I want very much to ask you—something about McCarthy." Traynor's face was suddenly troubled. "When you and I were having our talk last evening, you told me that you already knew my record, but refused to say where you got the information. Of course, I know now that it was from McCarthy. I was tremendously touched when you let me go off with the jewels, accepting my word for what I proposed to do with them although you knew—what I was. But *why* didn't you tell me that Mac was on my trail?"

She looked out the window for a few seconds before answering.

"You—naturally you couldn't guess the reason. Perhaps only a woman would have thought of it." She paused. "You see, you had told me that you were going to return the jewels and go straight because of—of Jocelyn. If that was what you wanted to do—I wanted you to do it! But suppose I had told you about McCarthy? Neither Jocelyn, nor even *yourself,* could ever have been *quite* sure that your good intention wasn't colored by—by fear of *him!*"

"Holy mackerel!" Jimmy reached out almost reverently and dropped his hand upon one of hers. "You were right; dead right! Bless you, child, and thank you!"

"Didn't you say yourself that I was an exceptionally clever young woman? I judged you so well and believed in you so implicitly that I didn't hesitate to wire McCarthy to go to the house the next morning, because you had recovered the jewels and taken them to New York! The impudence of the creature, trying to bribe me to spy on you! I was determined that he should be present at your justification and eat coals of fire—or whatever the expression is!"

"That's a very good expression," said Traynor gravely. "Mac had just the subdued air of a man who has been eating coals of fire; you couldn't have described it more neatly." He reflected briefly. "Still, I don't want you to think for an instant that Mac is a bad sort; he isn't."

"You're—generous, Mr. Traynor. I've noticed that before."

"Oh—he's on his side of the fence and I'm on mine,

but I feel sure Mac would put in a good word for me if necessary."

"He did. He told me he liked you."

"Yes? I'm glad you mentioned that; they say a man isn't entirely bad if his enemy respects him!" The detective bent his head and stared reflectively at the floor. Queer, unreasonable thoughts stirred in his brain. He sighed, and looked up. "This case has closed, and in a way I'm sorry. It has been interesting. But I can tell you one thing, Miss Morand——"

"Miss Barron!"

"Oh—of course. I can tell you one thing, Miss Barron——"

"For that matter—why not Denise?"

"Denise," repeated Jimmy Traynor, and found himself lingering over the word. Lovely girl—Denise. Lovely name—Denise. Queer how names sometimes just suit the person they belong to. Denise was perfect—for Denise! The detective's quick brain flashed back over the past few days and his eyes were suddenly opened to the most serious error he had ever made in his life. He spoke slowly but decisively. "I can tell you one thing, D-Denise; if I had the power to turn back the clock and start this affair all over again, there is one mistake I wouldn't make. I wouldn't fall in love with Jocelyn."

"N-no?"

"No. I'd fall in love with you."

The girl continued to stare out of the window. Silence reigned supreme. Then, as thousands of her sex have done before her, Denise took her courage in both hands and plumped for happiness.

"I—I wish you had that power, Jimmy!"

*"Denise!"* A news-butcher, passing at that instant through the aisle, started violently; he traced the cry to its source and went on, obviously bored. "Denise! You *mean it!"*

"Y-yes, Jimmy!" She drew away quickly. "Not *here!"*

"Well, everybody else seems to have kissed you this morning," he complained with reasonable discontent.

"They—they didn't count." The small hand he was holding suddenly turned in his grasp and clutched his. "Jimmy, I've got to go to Chicago; will you come?"

"Can—can we be married when we get there?"

"Married? In Chicago? I—I suppose so. Lots of people must get married there."

"Darling!"

"I'm glad of one thing, Jimmy; I'm almost certain your aunt will prefer me to—to Jocelyn. I don't think she liked Jocelyn."

"My aunt!" A sudden recollection came to Jimmy Traynor and he grinned delightedly. "Darling, even before I went to Tarryville, she hoped you would marry me!" Denise looked pardonably bewildered, and he hastened to explain. "She didn't want me to take this case at all, and, when I insisted, she said she hoped the alligator would get me!"

"Jimmy!"

"She got her wish, dear."

"What an absurd person you are! Listen, child, you haven't let me finish my story about this morning in the drawing-room——"

"Is there more?"

"They all thought I was on my way to Chicago, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"And McCarthy took *you* and put you on the ten-thirty, didn't he?"

"Yes. What are you getting at, dear?"

"While I was wondering if I'd *ever* escape from beneath that sofa, the usual morning call came from the hospital regarding Uncle Philip's condition. Geoffrey went to answer the telephone, and of course your Jocelyn couldn't let him out of her sight a minute. She went with him. I wriggled out, and—and——"

She picked up her hand-bag. She placed it on her lap, slipped its clasps and opened it a bare two inches.

"Peek, Jimmy!"

He peeked. At that moment a ray of sunshine came through the window of the car and illumined the depths of the bag; the reflection nearly blinded him. He jumped convulsively, shot a swift look the length of the coach and back, and closed the hand-bag with almost frantic haste.

"Denise!"

"Jimmy, they just left them sitting there on the table! Any passing tramp might have jumped through the open window and taken them! Of course they'll suppose that's what happened! It was more than human nature could stand, so I scrabbled them into my bag, hopped out of the window and—and here I am!"

"Denise! You—you *wonder!*"

"All's well that ends well! I'm glad I don't come to you empty handed," said Denise Morand.

THE END

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